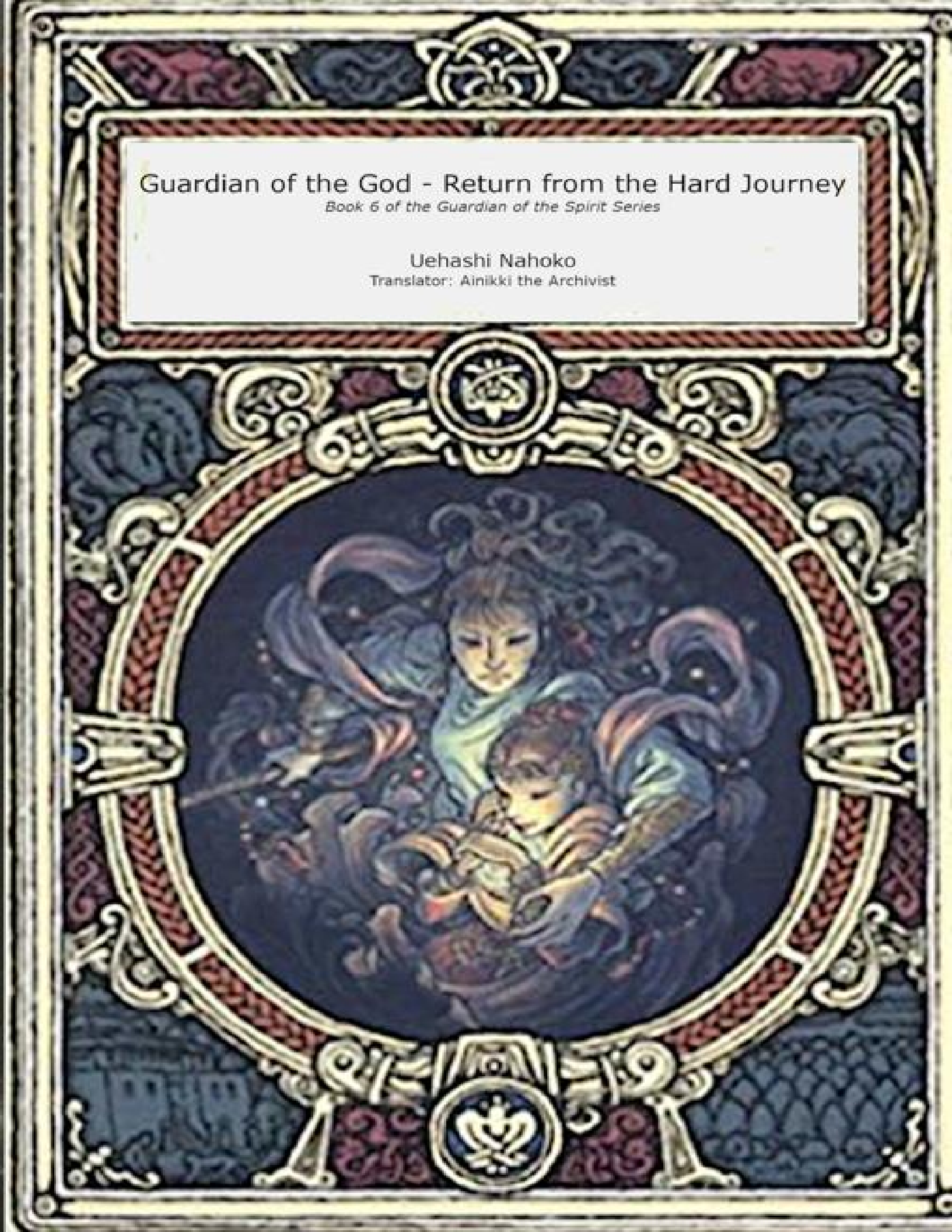
Guardian of the God - Return from the Hard Journey

Book 6 of the Guardian of the Spirit Series

Uehashi Nahoko

Translator: Ainikki the Archivist



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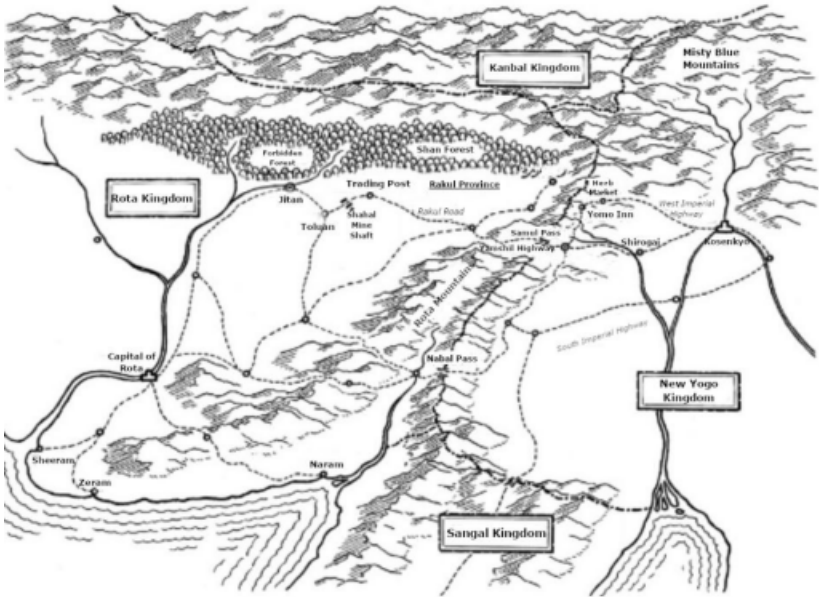
Kambal Kingdom
Misty Blue Mountains
Forbidden Forest
Shan Forest
Rota Kingdom
Trading Post
Rakul Province
Herb Market
Jitan
Rakul Road
West Imperial Highway
Yomo Inn
Tohan
Shahal Mine Shaft
Samel Pass
Oroshi Highway
Shirogai
Kosenkyo
Rota Mountains
South Imperial Highway
Capital of Rota
Nabal Pass
New Yogo Kingdom
Sheeram
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Prologue - In the Garden Behind the Palace

The light of the setting sun bathed the palace's garden in golden light. Ihan looked out at the garden from where he sat nestled in the roots of a tall Tou tree. The sensation of being surrounded by the tree roots was deeply comforting.

The garden was attached to the royal family's personal living quarters, so most people never came here except his brother and the garden's tenders. It was one of the only places in the palace where Ihan could be alone. Ihan had been raised in this palace; this spot under the tree was his favorite.

The ceremony to celebrate the new year had only just ended. It was still winter, but there was no snow in the garden. This palace had been built on the border between northern and southern Rota, so its weather shared characteristics of both halves of the country. Ihan's own palace in the north was probably buried in snow.

The evening light wavered. The garden was quiet and warm as if it was the beginning of spring. Ihan felt a profound sense of peace and restoration being here after his long day among the noise and busyness of the rest of the palace, like a snake shedding an old skin.

Yosam had departed the palace for Sangal that morning to attend the new King's coronation. The spears of his guardsmen had glittered in the sun as they'd marched away from the city. Ihan smiled fondly to himself as he thought of his brother. Surrounded by his royal retinue, Yosam had appeared every inch the King of Rota.

My brother is a wise and wonderful ruler. Ihan thought something like this whenever he looked into Yosam's eyes. His sincerest wish was for Yosam to live a long life in health and happiness. Yosam excelled in arts related to both diplomacy and warfare; he was physically strong and well-trained in the use of weapons. Ihan had never known him to be

very ill or sickly, but recently he'd heard about Yosam catching fevers and being indisposed far more frequently than usual.

Yosam and Ihan's father had died young. He'd been healthy for most of his life, but died of a high fever after a prolonged illness. During his fevers, their father had kept silent on most matters of government; Yosam was similar to him in this. Ihan wished Yosam would show more consideration to matters regarding his own health. He wished Yosam would have sent him to Sangal as his representative, but he understood why he hadn't. The coronation was a good opportunity for Yosam to meet many of the rulers of the northern continent in person.

But the country is in crisis right now. If something happened to him now, matters would quickly get even worse. Why didn't he stay here and hold the country together and let me handle Sangal?

There had been a terrible massacre at Shintadan prison fortress last year. A Tal woman had tried to invite the terrifying god Talhamaya into herself; if she'd succeeded, she would have gained great destructive power. But she'd failed and been executed at Shintadan. Yosam had sent Rota's greatest hunters and magic weavers, the Kashal, to investigate the massacre, but so far there'd been no word from their leader Sufar or any of the other Kashal.

Ihan watched the shadows of the garden's trees in the failing light of the early evening. He thought about the significance of Yosam going to Sangal while leaving Ihan to govern Rota. Ihan would have to hold Rota's founding ceremony without Yosam. All of the clan lords, including the southern lords that completely detested Ihan, would gather in the Ritual Hall at Jitan, which was close to Ihan's own castle. Yosam had left him with a gravely important task. He was glad Yosam trusted him so much, but he was still worried about the ceremony.

Maybe he's trying to test me, to make sure I'm ready to be King?

By having Ihan conduct Rota's founding ceremony, Yosam was directly demonstrating that Ihan was his immediate heir. Moving against Ihan without Yosam there would be an act of treason. Perhaps

Yosam was expecting that all the lords would gather and show Ihan respect at the ceremony.

I doubt it will work out that way. The southern clan lords hate me. Ihan smiled to himself and looked up at the sky. *I wish I could work with the northern clan lords more...but that would probably only make things worse.*

Ihan hoped to make broad and sweeping reforms that went against a lot of established traditions. He frowned as he considered the northern lords and their hidebound families and clans. He understood how they felt, to an extent. The climate of the south was warm; the southern lords grew rich and fat with no effort made on their part to be successful. The south wanted to manipulate the rest of the country for its own benefit; the southern lords viewed the north as nothing but dead weight.

The men and women of the north suffered long winters of blistering cold and deep snow. Their herds and flocks were frequently attacked by wolves; the winter wind was so cold that it froze the tears to their faces. Summers in the north were all too brief. The soil in the north was also not as fertile as in the south, so their harvests were always smaller. Laborers in the north gained nothing but pain and exhaustion from their hard work.

The purpose of many of Ihan's proposed reforms was to support the north by leveraging the strengths of the south. He wanted to save the country--but he was worried about the clan lords' stubbornness and quickness to anger. They might not hear him out before deciding to oppose him.

"Prince Ihan."

Ihan looked up in surprise and saw the shadow of a figure with a drawn sword standing over him. They were perhaps ten paces away. He squinted and identified a woman with a monkey sitting on one of her shoulders.

"Shihana? Is that you?" he asked. He let out a long breath. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

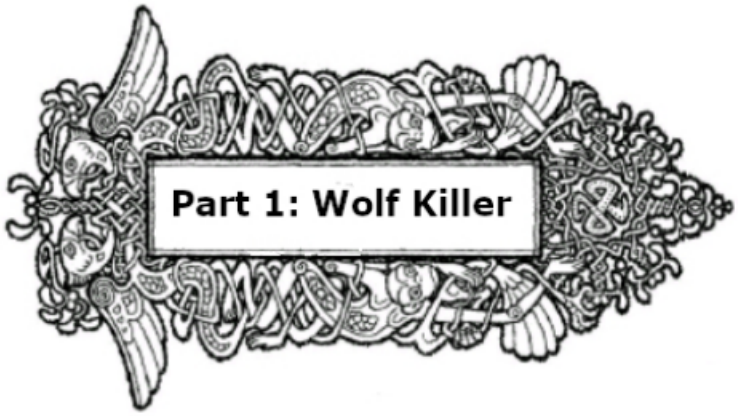
Shihana smiled. "Sorry. Force of habit."

Ihan gestured for Shihana to come closer. “I’ve been waiting for your report,” he said. “Where have you been all this time?”

Ihan thought he’d be hearing this report from Sufar, the leader of the Kashal. He’d been waiting a long time for it, much longer than he’d anticipated, so he let his irritation show plainly.

Shihana stared straight at Ihan and said quietly, “I have news of Torisha.”

Ihan felt like Shihana had just shot him through the heart. Shihana’s report was entirely different from the one he’d expected.


Part 1: Wolf Killer

Chapter 1 - The Night of the Blizzard

The air was cold and damp. Asra huddled inside her warm coat and looked up at the silvery pale sky. She frowned from beneath her hood.

“Asra?”

Mina was sharing a horse with Asra. She turned to look at her and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Mina was the beloved daughter of the caravan leader, Naka; she had just turned eight that year. She had a sweet high voice like a songbird’s. Mina got along with almost everyone. When she’d learned that another girl close to her own age would be traveling with the caravan, she’d seen it as an opportunity to make a new friend.

Asra and Mina had played together since the very first day of their journey. When they stopped in the evenings, Mina taught Asra how to fetch water and help with the cooking. Asra was unfamiliar with Yogo’s traditions and ways of doing things, so there was a lot that she didn’t know how to do at first. But everyone in the caravan was always on their best behavior in front of Mina, so Asra became used to the caravan’s way of life in almost no time at all. Asra also managed to learn and understand some Yogoese.

Asra seemed to have a natural knack for horseback riding. She’d cared for an old horse with her father a long time ago and still remembered much of what she’d learned. Asra’s father had also taught her a lot about living in the woods. When the caravan crossed the border into Rota at the Samal Pass, Asra made herself useful to her new friends by finding wild autumn fruits and herbs for medicine. Mina said she wished that Asra could be her older sister.

Asra was shy and reserved by nature, so when Balsa observed her easing out of her protective shell to help the caravan she was greatly relieved. She could focus on her work of guarding the caravan more easily knowing that Asra was safe and comfortable with the others.

After they'd gotten through Samal pass, they'd joined up with another caravan from northern Rota that was carrying a large cargo of furs. Larger caravans were more difficult targets for bandits and thieves; the new caravan also had its own guards. Balsa and the other guards were able to take shifts at night and get adequate sleep, which Balsa was genuinely grateful for.

So far, the journey from Shirogai had gone well, but there'd been some light snowfall at intervals starting the night before last. The wind was also getting noticeably colder. Winter had come upon them unexpectedly quickly.

The Western Imperial Highway in New Yogo became the Yamushil Highway in Rota. The Yamushil Highway progressed a bit further north before forking into northern and southern roads. Following the highway to the south would take them to the capital of Rota, while following it to the north would take them to the Rakul region. The northern road became thinner and less defined the further it went until it vanished into the trees and grasslands.

The Rakul region was bitterly cold for most of the year, making farming all but impossible there. The people that lived in Rakul eked out their bare existence by growing a type of grain that was resistant to the cold. They also raised sheep and a thick-furred variety of cow called shiku.

Asra kept her hands on the reins of the horse she shared with Mina and thought for a moment. She pulled up on the reins with her left hand and turned the horse away from the rest of the caravan.

"What are you doing?" Mina asked.

"I just noticed something. I want to find Balsa."

Balsa was riding a fast black horse around the edges of the caravan, moving in circles. The withered winter grass cast long shadows in the pale light of the sun. Asra saw Balsa's horse moving through the grass and urged her horse in Balsa's direction.

Balsa stopped her horse the moment she saw Asra. Asra's horse trotted up beside Balsa's. With her customary shyness, Asra said,

“Um...Balsa, I don’t like how the sky looks. The wind’s picked up, so...I think a blizzard’s coming.”

The breath of Balsa’s horse steamed in the air. She patted its neck, then nodded at Asra. “I think you’re right. I’ve been worried about the same thing for a while now. Mr. Naka said this morning that he wanted to stop in Torua, but it looks like the blizzard will hit before we get there. I’ll go talk to him. Then I should probably look for a sheltered spot for us all to make camp.”

Balsa turned her horse to the side using only her knees, then galloped toward the head of the caravan. The Naka family owned the caravan’s goods; the entire family was made up of eight people. The family had eight horses and eight sets of baggage between them.

As caravan leader, Naka rode at the very head of the caravan on a neutered stallion; directly behind him were all the goods that the caravan needed for its journey. Naka’s brother Toshi rode ahead of two large carts of furs that they would sell or trade in Rota. Behind the carts, Mina’s mother Marona and Toshi’s wife and new baby rode in covered wagons. The rear of the caravan was protected by Naka’s oldest son and his youngest brother, Tam. Naka’s aged mother rode in the baggage train behind the rest of the caravan.

The larger caravan that they’d joined up with at Rota’s border traveled behind theirs. The leader of that caravan was named Ren. His caravan was far larger than Naka’s; it was protected by forty-odd guards all armed with swords, bows and arrows.

Naka stopped his horse as Balsa approached. He pointed to the sky and nodded at her. “I thought we’d make it to Torua this morning, but now I’m not so sure,” he called out to her. Before them was a vast expanse of flat land covered in withered grass. If the blizzard trapped them out here in the open, they could all die. Balsa squinted behind the caravan and pointed out a narrow strip of woods they’d passed an hour or so before.

“There may be cattle pens near those trees we passed not too long ago,” she said. “It’s our best chance for finding some kind of shelter.”

Naka nodded. “I hate to ask, but can you carry this message to Ren’s caravan as well? I’ll send Mina and Asra to tell everyone here that we’re turning back.”

Asra watched Balsa’s horse fly as fast as an arrow toward Ren’s caravan. Naka called out to Asra and Mina, so Asra rode up to him and received his message. Asra directed her horse toward the rear of the caravan and cantered as she and Mina called out that they were turning back toward the trees.

Balsa rode up to Ren and his coterie of guards to report news of the coming blizzard. Ren puffed out his cheeks and said, “So? What does the weather have to do with us? You must be a cowardly woman if you’re afraid of a little snow.”

Balsa explained that Naka’s caravan was turning back.

Ren threw up his hands and said, “Fine, we’ll turn around. Now get out of my sight. I can’t stand to look at you.”

Ren and all of his guards were men. They didn’t know one another very well and were much more independent and taciturn compared to Naka and his family. Despite the caravan’s large size, it had managed to make excellent time so far, so it was easy to understand why Ren would be upset. It was clear that he wanted to keep going no matter what.

Balsa understood how Ren felt, but he wouldn’t be able to keep moving in a snowstorm. Neither would Naka and his people.

Balsa turned her horse to go back to Naka’s caravan. A guard named Shisoya brought his horse alongside hers and hailed her; she stopped. Shisoya’s gray-flecked black hair fluttered in the strengthening wind.

“Maybe it’s none of my business, but...” Shisoya said quietly. “That girl should probably stay in the wagon so she won’t be seen.”

“You’re right,” Balsa said. “I’ll take care of it.”

The forest bordered the lands and holdings of Rotan herdsmen, but Asra was Tal. Shisoya wanted Balsa to hide Asra so that she wouldn’t cause a panic. Shisoya stared at Balsa for a long moment until he felt sure she’d understood him, then nodded.

Balsa returned to Naka's caravan and told Naka how things had gone with Ren. She also asked his permission for Asra to ride in one of the wagons. Naksa's expression conveyed mild irritation at the request, but after thinking a bit, he shrugged.

"Have Asra ride in the wagon with Mina," Naka said.

"Huh? Why does Asra need to ride in the wagon?" Mina asked loudly.

Silence fell over the rest of the caravan. All of the adults understood why Asra had to hide.

"The Rotans don't like Asra," Balsa said. "You'll have to help her and make sure her face stays hidden while she's in the wagon, Mina."

Mina looked at Balsa in confusion, but she nodded. Everyone stood still and didn't say anything as Asra approached the wagon. Asra felt the skin of her face tightening from nervousness as she climbed into the wagon and sat down in the very center of it.

Naka's wife Marona was driving the wagon. Asra looked out at Balsa's face, which was framed by Marona's arms. When Asra looked Balsa in the eyes, she swallowed suddenly and sat up straight.

Balsa's eyes were hard and devoid of compassion. They shone with a powerful and mysterious inner light. Asra felt like Balsa's eyes were accusing her of something. *Did you want to show yourself to the Rotans?* That's what she felt like Balsa was asking her.

Asra didn't know what she wanted to do. She hadn't thought about hiding herself while she was in New Yogo at all, but now that she was back in Rota, she remembered to be afraid of the villagers. She didn't even have her brother with her to protect her from them this time.

Asra gritted her teeth. Whatever Balsa saw in Asra's face made her soften her expression. She smiled, then turned her horse away from the wagon and trotted off.

Naka's caravan made their way toward the strip of woods they'd passed by before, but the road vanished almost to nothing in the tall grass, making the progression of the wagons tortuously slow. The mounted members of the caravan had to stomp the grass down entirely flat for the wagons to make any headway at all.

Plains rabbits also built their warrens in the tall grass, which made navigation for the people on mounts even more difficult. Sometimes the warrens covered so much ground that the riders were forced to find a path around them for the wagons.

The sun began to set. The sky overhead was dark gray with thick clouds that loomed over the caravan. They were running out of time. People called out to one another and moved more quickly in a last desperate attempt to get everyone to safety.

The herders that lived on this land built large, sheltered cattle pens to help their livestock survive the winter. The fences of the pens were formed of thick tree trunks and long lengths of leather reinforced by

retaining walls woven from the branches of young trees. Balsa could tell at a glance that the cattle pens were built well enough to prevent the caravan and their animals from freezing to death.

The herders' huts were just behind the cattle pens. Their wives and young children would pass the winter in Torua while the men of working age stayed here to tend the herds of sheep and cows. They also had to protect their animals from attack by roving packs of wolves.

Naka and Ren rode ahead of everyone else to beg the herders for shelter until the storm passed. The herders were already using the cattle pens for their own animals, but they agreed to let Naka and Ren's people make use of their homes and barns for the night. When the wagons arrived, the strong and thickly bearded herdsmen called out to one another to help guide the wagons to their huts.

Asra stayed concealed inside one of the wagons and listened to the herdsmen speaking outside. The dialect they used was rough and masculine, but their tone was quite friendly toward Naka and Ren. They called out to the women inside the cart to go slowly and be careful as they got closer to the huts.

The herders' gruff kindness made Asra uncomfortable. This was the first time any Rotan had called out to her in a friendly or solicitous way. She was much more used to fear and threats.

I should stay in the cart until the blizzard's over, she thought. *I'm sure it's warm enough for me to survive in here. But they might not let me stay. Maybe the huts will be big enough to hide me somewhere? What will happen when I go inside?*

Marona turned to look at Asra. Asra's heart pounded wildly, but her voice didn't shake when she said, "I'll use a shuma face covering when I leave the cart. They won't see me." Her Yogoese was still accented and imprecise, but when she pulled out a face covering from her pocket and mimed putting it on, Marona seemed to understand her.

Asra unbuttoned the top half of her coat and settled the gray face covering over her shoulders and head so that it concealed over half of her face. Then she refastened the buttons on her coat to keep the face

covering in place. She left the cart very last, after everyone else. She walked past the Rotan men with her face cast down; no one stopped her or even looked at her as she entered the hut.

I'm safe for now, she thought, *but what about when we have to eat?* She was nervous, but she also felt strangely calm. When she stepped into the Rotan hut with Mina and the others, what she felt wasn't fear, but simple curiosity.

Once she was inside, Asra was led into a little room that was usually used for storage. Dried meat was stacked up in crates from floor to ceiling. Clay pots and jars were lined up alongside one of the walls. Two of the walls were formed entirely out of stacks of firewood.

There were two doors leading into the room. The one in front of her was open; through it, she could see herders preparing places to sleep and a hot meal for themselves and their unexpected guests. A large fire was lit in the room beyond this one; she felt its heat even from this distance. The air was so thick with smoke that it stung her eyes.

The two caravans had been granted three of the herders' huts. Some of Naka's men piled up wet luggage in the storage room while others laid out blankets for people to sleep on the floor. Mina was in a bright and energetic mood; she ran back and forth from room trying to help everyone she saw. The men Mina passed settled their hands kindly on her head and spoke to her in a friendly way.

Asra made up her own bed behind a huge pile of luggage. As soon as she was finished, Balsa entered the storage room. She crouched down next to Asra and said quietly, "I told the herders that you have a cut on your face and you're embarrassed about it. No one should look at you too closely. I told the caravans to keep to the same story."

Asra nodded. Balsa lifted Asra's face covering a little and looked her in the eye. "Are you all right?"

Asra smiled. Balsa's shoulders relaxed as she smiled back. She punched Asra lightly in the shoulder, then stood up. The sound of the wind howling came from outside the hut. The wind was strong enough to shake all the walls.

A long line of men entered the storage room; some had to crowd past others as they walked. Their coats were completely covered in snow.

“This is some blizzard,” one of the herders said. “We haven’t had any snow this winter until now.”

The men talked among themselves as they brushed snow off each other. They were glad to be safe and protected from the storm outside. A large blizzard was a terrifying thing, but the herders were grateful for the company of the caravan. They didn’t often get to meet people from other parts of the world.

The walls of the hut continued to shake in the wind. Cold air blew in through gaps in the walls. Mina and Asra started moving the luggage around to block the largest of the holes. When the herders noticed what they were doing, one said, “Ah, Yogo girls are so smart! You’re making the walls a little thicker for us so that it stays warm in here. Masshul rai!” This last declaration was an expression of praise used to compliment Rotan children.

Mina beamed happily at their praise. Asra’s feelings were more complicated; she couldn’t identify them easily. She remembered that her father had often called out “Masshul rai!” to her and Chikisa.

The meal that the herders shared with the caravans became a feast. Both the herders and their guests put their all into preparing the meal, which was made up of fresh sheep’s milk, mutton stew, and dried meat. The stew contained a savory mushroom that completely erased the bitter tang of the sheep’s milk. It warmed the herders and their guests all the way through so that they almost forgot how bitterly cold it was outside.

There was also a kind of cheese called rakua made from cow’s milk that could be roasted on skewers with the dried meat. When the outer skin of the cheese browned, the men removed the skewers from over the fire and bit into the toasted gooey cheese. There was fresh ham hidden in the center of the cheese.

Naka brought out some of his own expensive wine from New Yogo to share; he also shared a sugary sweet called shosom, which the Rotans

had never seen before. After Mina took the first bite, the herdsmen devoured the shosom greedily.

Asra ate while sitting behind the caravan's luggage, doing her best to make herself invisible. The room was warm and noisy from the feast. It looked like a lot of fun. She had no idea how Rotan people usually lived; she'd never seen a Rotan smile before now.

Would they stop smiling if she removed her face covering?

Balsa crouched down at Asra's side, then sat down and stretched out. "We can sleep safe and warm tonight," she said to Asra with a little smile.

Asra nodded. "Someone will have to go check on the horses, though."

Balsa's expression suddenly became serious. "Naka and Ren didn't know that the blizzard would hit this hard, or this fast. I think they expected to reach Rakul before the first snow of the season. I'm not sure how well the wagons will be able to move in all the ice and snow."

Asra's eyes flashed with sudden comprehension. "Will we make it to Jitan in time?"

Balsa nodded. "Don't worry about that. We'll make it. I'm more worried about four-legged thieves in these parts."

Four-legged thieves? Asra frowned, confused, but then she realized that Balsa was talking about wolves. Wolves starved in winter and often attacked livestock--or horses. They didn't usually attack people, but a hungry wolf in winter was a terrifying beast. The wailing of the wind through the walls sounded like a wolf pack howling. Goosebumps prickled Asra's arms.

"The fur trade is a dangerous business," Balsa said. 'The most expensive kind of coyan pelt sells out fast in New Yogo during the winter, so everyone wants to get their hands on them. In New Yogo, there's a medicinal herb for treating animal diseases called shaim that can only be harvested at this time of year, so it's always in scarce supply. A lot of people will be traveling right now to gather shaim."

As Asra listened, she wondered why Mr. Naka would bring a newborn baby on such a dangerous journey.

Balsa seemed to guess what she was thinking. “Caravans make greater profits than ordinary merchants,” she said. “And Mr. Naka and his family have always lived this way. Mr. Naka probably didn’t even think about leaving his brother's family and the baby at home. The road is home to them.”

Asra glanced at the cooking fire in the next room. The flames lit up half her face, leaving the other half in shadow. She nodded in understanding. If Asra had been born to a family that owned caravans, she might have lived her life as a member of one. If she’d been born into a family of herders, she might live in a hut like this with a Rotan family. But she’d been born Tal. There seemed to be a lot of different ways for people to live.

I wonder where Balsa was born, and how she was raised?

She wanted to ask Balsa, but the words stuck in her throat. The rest of the night passed peacefully. Asra didn’t show her face to anyone.

Chapter 2 - The Wolves Draw Near

The blizzard did not stop for three days.

Being confined for such a long time made everyone feel restless. There wasn't another feast like there'd been the first night; the herders had to think about preserving their stores for the long winter ahead. No one went hungry--the herders fed Naka and his people before they fed themselves--but both the herders and the caravan members realized quickly that they would have to be frugal and share resources as much as possible. The herders shared unstintingly with their guests, asking only for their companionship and the distraction of news from the world.

The members of Naka's caravan did their best to help the herders whenever they could. They looked after and tended their animals for them. They helped secure their livestock inside the cattle pens with rope so that they wouldn't wander off and get lost in the raging storm.

The wind died down on the third night after the blizzard had started. The silence was unsettling after hearing the wind howl for so long.

Everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief as the storm finally ended, but their relief was short-lived: the moment the wind stopped, a long howl echoed outside the walls of the hut. The howl was long and drawn-out; it seemed impossibly close. Everyone inside the hut froze as they listened to the wolf howl.

"Shit," one of the herdsmen said. "It's because the blizzard lasted so long, I'll bet. The wolves are hungry."

The herders took up pine torches and gathered their weapons, then went out to drive off the wolves. Balsa also picked up her spear and was about to leave when Asra called out to her.

"Balsa."

"It would go badly for us if they got the horses," Balsa said. "Asra, please look after the little kids so that they don't get scared. I'm

counting on you."

Balsa removed her cloak from her bag and put it on. She went out into the cold dark with the men of the caravan.

The hut seemed far emptier and lonelier with Balsa and the herders gone. Mina was scared, so Asra held her hand and listened hard to what was happening outside. She heard the men call out to one another at intervals, but nothing else.

Asra wasn't sure how much time passed before she heard a wolf howl again. It sounded even closer than before.

Mina started crying and clung to Asra.

"Don't be scared," Asra whispered. "They can't get in here."

Mina nodded uncertainly.

The animals in the cattle pens bleated or neighed in fear. Asra could hear them stomping their feet and pressing against the outer walls of the pens. Asra looked at Marona and the other women and noticed their expressions of alarm. Outside, the men's voices became louder and more desperate.

Someone screamed--one of the men. Something terrible must have happened. Asra couldn't bear to sit still and do nothing, so she rummaged around in Balsa's bag for a pine torch. She grabbed it out of the bag and lit it, then said, "Miss Marona, I'm going to see if everyone's all right."

"Thank you!" Marona called after her. "But, Mina--you have to stay here!"

Mina ignored her mother and followed Asra outside. It was still completely dark; the air was as cold as ice. Breath steamed over her face as she huddled deeper into her thick coat. The freezing air made it hurt to breathe. She started crying again and couldn't see.

"Stop it! Go back inside! If you chase the wolves, they'll kill you!" the leader of the herders called out. Asra could see men standing around the cattle pens with their torches.

“If I lose the horses, the caravan is done for,” Naka called back. “Don’t try to stop me!”

Asra sneaked silently toward the cattle pens. No one seemed to notice her. In the flickering light of the torches, she could see one of the cattle pens clearly. A wolf howled again, causing the horses in the pen to stomp and kick in fear--but they weren’t Naka’s horses. Apparently, those had broken away from the pens and run away. Naka was desperately searching for them, shouting as he ran.

“Mr. Naka! I’ll go after the horses! You stay here, where it’s safer!” Balsa called out.

But Naka didn’t seem to hear her. He mounted up on one of the herders’ horses and galloped into the trees. His younger brother’s family chased after him on their own mounts. Balsa smacked her lips together as she mounted her own horse and ran after them.

The herders called after Balsa, telling her not to do anything stupid; more herders ran out of their huts to see what was going on. Two men were working to repair the broken wall of one of the cattle pens; she shouted to the other herders for more help.

What should I do? Asra thought.

She should probably go back inside and tell Marona and the others what was happening. She turned around and saw the shadow a someone crouched down along the side of a cattle pen.

“Mina!” she gasped in surprise. Mina ignored her in favor of climbing into the cattle pen and mounting her own horse. By bad luck, her horse was in the damaged cattle pen; the herders made a wall with their arms and tried to stop the horse from escaping, but Mina pushed past them.

Asra sprinted up to Mina’s horse and seized the bit, which stopped the horse long enough for her to leap into the saddle behind Mina. She tried to grab the reins and stop the horse, but Mina refused to let them go.

“Mina! I get it! I won’t try to stop us; just give me the reins so I can steer!”

Mina handed the reins clumsily to Asra; she pointed the horse in the same direction Balsa and Naka had gone. She knew that what she was doing was stupid, but she couldn't stand the thought of Balsa and the others getting lost and eaten by the wolves. She understood completely why Mina had taken her horse out of the cattle pen. Asra needed to make sure that Balsa was safe with her own eyes.

"Dad? Dad!" Mina cried out over and over again.

Asra knew painfully well what Mina was feeling. She remembered praying desperately for the safety of her own father when he'd gotten lost in the woods, but no one had heard her prayers then: when she and her family had found him, he'd frozen to death and had been half-eaten by wolves.

Asra kept her bearings by staying within sight of the flickering pine torches held by the other riders in the woods. The horse broke into a gallop. The freshly fallen snow was still soft and light as the horse's hooves kicked it up. In a few seconds, Asra, Mina and the horse were completely covered in snow.

The horse kept running for a long time. The pale silver light of a half-moon shone through the branches of the trees. The shadows of tree branches stretched before her in a long line. Asra lost sight of the herders' torchlight, but she kept encouraging the horse to run.

A shadow like black water rose up out of the ground before her. And not just one: others swam up out of the darkness. Asra felt herself being surrounded by them; fear paralyzed her and sent goosebumps up her spine.

Wolves.

She couldn't count all of the shadows in the dark, so this must be an enormous pack. She heard one of the wolves leap and latch on to something ahead of her: Naka's horse. It was strange, but there didn't seem to be much snow on the ground here. There were a number of tall, thick trees and two huge stones that towered above her. Naka's horse must have stopped running here; that's why the wolves had managed to catch it.

Mina pointed out Naka in the dark. Asra turned the horse slightly so that they faced him head on, but the horse resisted going any further. Asra had to fight with the reins to get the horse to keep moving toward Naka. Asra's heart was in her throat as she tried desperately to reach him.

As the horse passed beneath the shadow of one of the huge trees, Asra felt something slap her hard in the face. In the middle of the dark forest, she could suddenly see the surface of a lake that shimmered in bright spring sunshine.

Hasal Ma Talhamaya? Talhamaya's sacred river?

She'd seen this lake and the river that flowed from it before, when she'd gone to the grave of Sada Talhamaya with her mother. The river flowed from this place into the rest of the forest. She felt something stir within herself, bouncing between her chest and spine.

"Dad!" Mina screamed. Naka and the others that had followed him turned toward her. Asra could see their stunned expressions. Balsa brought her horse up alongside Asra's and snatched the reins out of her hands.

"What are you doing here?" she yelled.

Her voice brought the forest to the front of Asra's vision; the lake and the river were still visible, but seemed farther away. She realized that she, Balsa, Mina, Naka and the others were completely surrounded by wolves.

Balsa knew that escaping this encounter with everyone alive would be incredibly difficult. She was prepared for some casualties, but she never expected Asra and Mina to follow her into such a dangerous situation.

Balsa gave her rage and frustration free rein as she slapped the flank of Asra's horse with the butt of her spear. As she galloped toward Naka, she passed one of the huge trees next to the boulders and freed her hatchet from her saddle. She dismounted and started hacking at the trunk of the tree.

“Mr. Naka!” she yelled as loudly as she could. “Everyone! Take your hatchets and gather as much dry bark as you can! We need to make a fire!”

Naka and the others attacked the trees around them with their hatchets. Making a fire with the wet outer bark of the trees would be next to impossible, but some of the inner layers might be dry. These were very old, very thick trees.

The blue-white eyes of the wolves glinted in the darkness. They were closing in.

Naka tried to set his own gathered pile of wood on fire with his torch. Some of the bark smoked and crackled, but the pile refused to light.

“Asra! Mina! Get under that tree!” Balsa shouted.

Asra slid off her horse and pulled Mina down, then took her hand and ran for the tree Balsa was pointing to. She wedged herself into the gap between the huge tree and one of the boulders with Mina.

“Toshi, get behind me! Shoot the wolves from the cover of the fallen trees!”

The expression on Toshi’s face hardened in determination. He and his family ran to the trees around Asra and Mina and readied their bows. Balsa ripped open her bag with her teeth so that she didn’t have to let go of her spear or the torch, then tossed it to the ground.

The horses neighed and reared. The atmosphere was as tight as a rope about to snap. Two wolves burst out of the trees and dashed directly at Balsa. Snow went flying in trails behind them. Balsa faced the wolves squarely and threw her torch directly in their faces.

The torch flew like an arrow; it landed on one of the wolves and set it on fire. The wolf yelped in pain and backed off. Balsa waved her spear aloft in warning, then gutted the other wolf when it sprang at her. She kicked at the disemboweled wolf’s legs and sent its body flying into the trees.

Naka finally managed to set one of the fallen trees on fire, but the entire pack swooped in on them before the fire could grow. Balsa’s spear hummed as it slashed through the air; she spun like a tornado as

she cut wolves down one by one. She moved so fast that those who watched her could scarcely believe she was human. She attacked relentlessly and prevented a single wolf from reaching the others from her side.

But there seemed to be no end to the wolves. They attacked from behind Balsa and were shot down by Naka, Toshi and the others, but the wolves kept coming long after they ran out of arrows.

There was a loud snapping sound: one of the packhorses' lead ropes was broken. The horse shied and fell over almost directly onto Balsa. Balsa twisted her body away from the falling horse; she nearly lost her balance. One of the wolves used her brief moment of distraction to lunge for her throat.

Balsa had no time to get out of the way or block the wolf's attack with her spear. She balled up her left fist and punched the wolf in its wide-open maw. Faster than the eye could see, she grabbed the wolf's tongue and yanked its head to the ground. She settled the wolf's chest over her knee and pulled down sharply on the tongue, breaking the wolf's ribs.

Asra watched blood drip down from Balsa's left hand to the forest floor. Naka was out of arrows; he screamed and called for help. The dark shadows of the wolves were getting closer and closer. She pushed Mina's face into her lap so that Mina wouldn't see.

I don't want to die. Asra shook all over. *God...please.*

She felt the sacred river flowing through her from her spine to her chest. She felt very odd, like her body had just been bisected at the legs, but it didn't hurt. A ring of light glowed around her neck, though she couldn't see it. The ring smelled like blood. Asra heard the sound of water rushing within her and felt it when the water flowed out of her body.

Her vision whited out from brightness and sudden heat. Light shot out from her chest to the ring of light around her neck; suddenly, Asra could see the ring there, glowing with a silvery light. She looked up. Shining like the silver scales of a fish in the darkness, she glimpsed the sharp, shining fangs of the god.

Talhamaya was starving for blood. Her fangs shone like sharpened swords as they cut through the wolves surrounding Asra. Asra felt each and every cut that the god made as she attacked the wolves. The river flowing within Asra gushed forth; there seemed to be no end to its force and power. As the river spilled out of her, it ceased to be water; it condensed and reformed into a mighty whirlwind. The wind was so strong that it was very nearly visible. Talhamaya's smooth movements as she eliminated wolves resembled a swimmer's; her range was limited only by Asra's line of sight. The wolves burst open like rotten fruit the moment Talhamaya's fangs touched them. Her power felt incomprehensible, huge and uncontrollable. Asra experienced an incredible feeling of safety and peace that was several times more intense than anything she'd ever felt before. It felt like she'd never be scared of anything ever again.

Drunk on this incredible power, Asra began to laugh. Every time another wolf fell dead in a gush of blood, she laughed. She drew an arc with her eyes and watched tall trees fall onto the backs of the wolves. The trees felt as soft and malleable as mud as they were chopped down. Splinters of wood scattered in all directions.

Asra didn't want Talhamaya to hurt Balsa or the other people, so she deliberately looked away from them and kept her focus on the wolves.

Silence fell. Asra sucked in a deep breath. Talhamaya retreated back into Asra and swam in the sacred river of Noyuk again. No one moved or spoke for a while. The silence stretched and became oppressive.

Balsa surveyed the corpses of the wolves under the light of the moon. Slowly, she turned and looked Asra in the eyes.

Asra beamed at her in satisfaction and relief. The light dancing in her eyes made her appear bold and powerful--and entirely unlike the shy girl Balsa knew. Balsa looked at Asra and couldn't move. She shook from head to toe. She stood stock still in the cold dark and could not tear her eyes away from Asra's beatific smile.

Chapter 3 - Inside a Prison Jar

Tanda saw holes above him, about the same width as his pinky finger. Wind wafted through them; Tanda felt a slight breeze on his face. The light they let in told Tanda that it was probably only a little past sunrise. He remembered waking up earlier in darkness, but he didn't know how much time had passed since then.

He didn't even remember when he'd fallen asleep last. He had no idea how he'd gotten here, or even where "here" was. He shifted his head and felt agonizing pain and nausea hit him in a wave. He prayed that this sickness would pass quickly, and then he remembered: he'd been given a sleeping drug. It was called macos, and using too much of it caused headaches and nausea.

Pain tore through the inside of his head. He remembered everything now: Shihana had tricked them all and knocked him out; she had some kind of plan to trap Balsa and Asra. When he and Sufar had gone back to the inn after being captured, Tanda had been certain that Shihana would kill him. Sufar had saved his life at the last possible moment by ordering her not to kill Tanda. Sufar was a powerful and well-respected magic weaver; his words and reputation still carried weight. Shihana had the assistance of the very strong men that had managed to bind Sufar, but they hadn't killed him or otherwise harmed him that Tanda could remember.

Sufar had persuaded Shihana that Tanda was too valuable of a hostage to kill. Tanda was grateful to him for saving his life, but being Shihana's captive was a harsh experience. He'd been forced to drink the sleeping drug that contained macos, and the aftereffects made him sick to his soul. He didn't remember anything at all after he'd drunk it. The fact that his memory was intact indicated that the damage done to his soul likely wasn't permanent, which relieved Tanda somewhat.

Morning light filtered in through the ventilation holes above his head. Tanda remembered that Chikisa had also been given sleeping herbs, but

not macos. Tanda hoped that when Chikisa woke up, he wouldn't feel nearly as awful as he did.

Tanda looked around and tried to determine where he was. The walls, floor and ceiling were all made of smooth clay. He saw no doors or windows. He felt like he was sitting inside a giant clay jar. The ceiling was too far away for him to reach. Even the ventilation holes were so high up that he couldn't look out of them.

He heard the soft, steady sound of flowing water somewhere nearby. He could also hear wind passing through the grass outside. Aside from that, he heard nothing.

"Where are we?" Chikisa whispered.

He was awake. "I don't know," Tanda answered. One of the effects of macos was the suppression of hunger, so he didn't feel an immediate urge to eat, but he was urgently thirsty. He glanced up at the ventilation holes. He didn't know if they'd be given water if he asked for it, but he also didn't know how long they'd gone without water. He needed to try.

"Hey!" Tanda called out. "Is anyone there? We need food and water!" There was no reply. Tanda remembered that this place had no door. His entire body felt numb from shock. He clamped down harshly on himself so that he wouldn't show any anxiety or fear in front of Chikisa. He'd be able to send his soul flying after he felt a little stronger, but he expected Shihana to be on guard against him doing that. He didn't know what else he could do.

To distract himself from his growing sense of dread, Tanda cried out as loudly as he could for help.

A shadow passed over the ventilation holes. Someone was standing above them, blocking the holes. Tanda panicked for a second, thinking someone had come to block up their air holes, but he was mistaken.

There was a loud popping sound above his head. Tanda looked up and saw that the ceiling of this place was a lid--he and Chikisa really *were* inside a huge jar.

Light poured into the jar from above. "Shut up," a man said in Rotan.

Tanda couldn't see the face of the man that opened the jar; the sunlight behind him was too bright. The man threw a large basket into the jar. The basket fell rapidly and crashed into the bottom of the jar with a shock; the basket's contents spilled out in all directions.

The lid of the jar was still open.

"Oi!" Tanda called up to the man. "Is there a toilet?"

The lid slammed shut. "I'll let you out later," the man said.

Tanda and Chikisa exchanged glances. "It looks like they gave us food and water, at least," Tanda muttered. He opened up one of the containers that had been in the basket and smelled it. He was pretty sure it contained food, but he wasn't entirely sure what it was. It smelled a little like a type of unleavened bread called bam.

"Do you know what this is?" Tanda asked Chikisa. He passed the food over to him.

Chikisa took a bite and frowned. "It seems like bam, but it tastes funny."

Tanda wondered where they were, exactly. When Tachiya had told him Balsa's message, he'd said that she was headed to Rota's Ritual Hall at Jitan. Shihana had definitely said that she intended to go to Rota. Tanda could deduce, then, that they were somewhere in Rota, specifically somewhere between the border with New Yogo and Jitan. The man outside the prison jar had spoken to him in an accent unique to northern Rota, which added support to Tanda's speculation.

Tanda divvied up the food and water between himself and Chikisa. He talked to Chikisa about what had happened to them so far and where he thought they were going. When Tanda mentioned the Ritual Hall, Chikisa's face completely changed color.

"The Ritual Hall at Jitan..." he breathed.

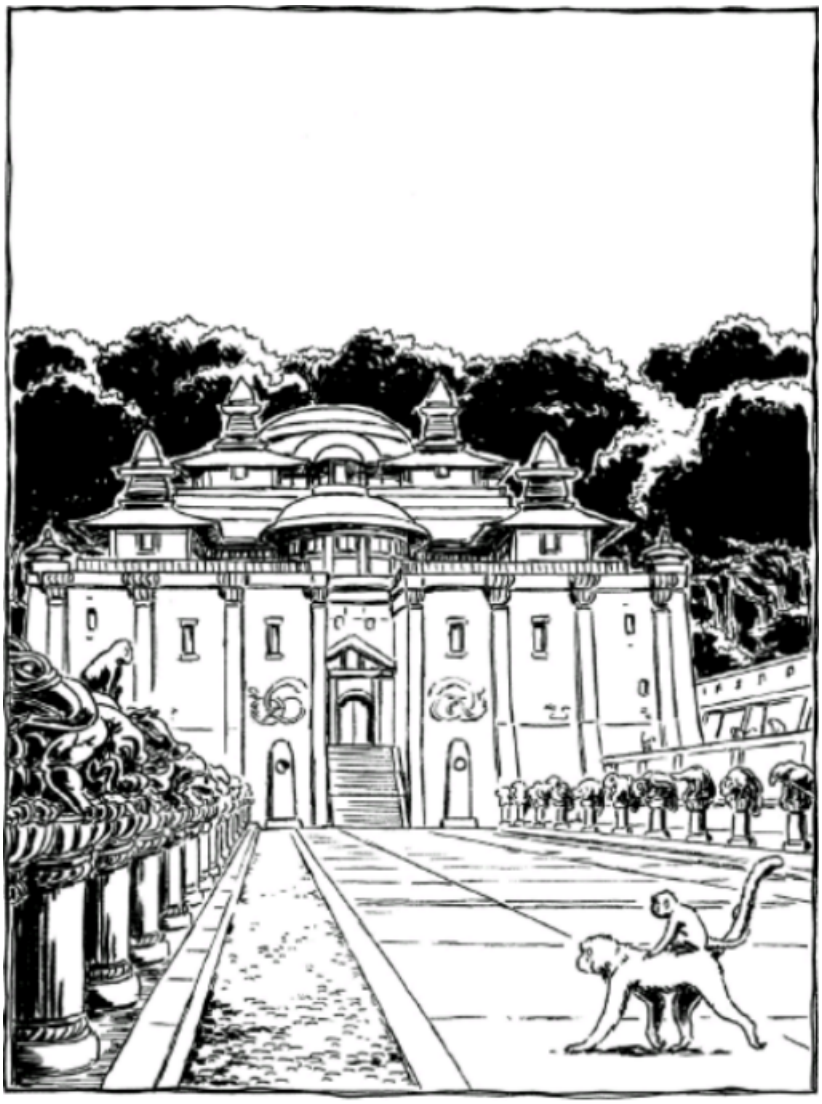
Tanda blinked. "Is there something important there that you know of?"

"Back when Rota was called Rotarbal, Jitan was the capital of the country. Sada Talhamaya built her palace in the same place where the

Ritual Hall is now." Chikisa told Tanda everything he knew about Sada Talhamaya.

The current capital of Rota was significantly further south than Jitan. The climate of northern Rota had been much warmer when Sada Talhamaya had been alive. The city had been called Sara Shi Talhamaya, the City of Talhamaya. Sada Talhamaya had built a magnificent palace there, but nothing remained of it now, not even ruins.

In the heart of the city, there'd been an enormous tree growing out of a clear, beautiful spring. The city had been surrounded by dense woods on every side. The forests had been warm enough to grow tropical fruit trees. A large population of monkeys had lived in the forest surrounding the city.



After the first King of Rota, Kiran, killed Sada Talhamaya, Jitan and the forest surrounding it gradually became colder over time. The Hasal Ma Talhmaya river, which carried Talhamaya into Rota, stopped flowing after Sada Talhamaya's death; the river's sudden disappearance continued to affect Rota's climate.

King Kiran built Rota's Ritual Hall at Jitan to purify the site where he'd killed Sada Talhamaya. He'd also built a castle at Jitan, which he'd entrusted to his younger brother; that castle was meant to help protect the north.

"To the Tal people, Jitan is a city of hopes and dreams--and regrets," Chikisa said. "When we became the Tal people long ago, we

swore that we'd never set foot in Jitan again."

Tanda frowned. What was Shihana thinking? Wasn't she chasing Asra so that she could kill her before she became Sada Talhamaya reborn? Why would she deliberately lead Asra to a place where Sada Talhamaya had spent so much of her life?

"I don't think Asra wants to go to Jitan," Tanda said.

Chikisa's face clouded over. "I'm not sure Asra wants to honor the vow that our people made not to set foot there."

Tanda looked at Chikisa with an expression of surprise. "Why?"

Chikisa's right hand instinctively covered the wound on his left hand. "Asra believed our mother," he said darkly. He stared at the bottom of the prison jar as he spoke. "Our dad got lost in the woods five years ago and was killed by wolves. It was just the three of us after that. Mom didn't take his death very well." He wrinkled his nose. "We got a lot poorer after he died--even poorer than we were before. I think she must have suffered a lot." He shrugged.

"Mom really started to change two years ago. She hated the teachings of our priests, the Tal Kumada. She tried to teach me and Asra to serve Talhamaya. She said that Talhamaya wasn't an evil god, but a sacred one that could help the Tal people. I didn't believe her--I couldn't, even when I tried--but Asra did. She didn't think our mom would lie to us."

Chikisa frowned deeply. "When our father was alive, we had friends and other Tal people that we could go to for help, but after he died we lived apart from everyone else. I didn't have any friends, and neither did Asra. We lived in the sacred forest close to Sada Talhamaya's grave. No one was ever there but us."

Tanda listened to Chikisa in silence.

"Before mom had Asra and me, she ran away from her home village and wound up alone in the woods. The Tal Kumada gave her work and a place to stay. She was almost entirely dependent on them for a while. She lived on sacred ground in the Shan Forest. Most Rotans are afraid to go in there, so it's pretty safe for Tal people. I think mom had a run-in with some Rotans before, so she probably decided to live there so she

wouldn't have to be afraid of them. When she married our dad, she persuaded him not to move. He told me that he built us a house in those woods because she refused to move anywhere else."

"Why are the Rotans so afraid of Shan forest?"

Chikisa shook his head a little. "I don't know. No Tal person ever wants to meet a Rotan, but we all go to markets to buy things and sell furs sometimes, even if it's only once or twice a year. But mom never wanted to see a Rotan, ever. She left all the shopping and trading to our dad."

Chikisa's face contorted in a frown. "Tal settlements are always small and isolated. We tend to live completely surrounded by the trees. Most of the time, a few families live together in the same place. The Tal Kumada priests visit each settlement a few times a month. They taught us history and religion; they also carried news from place to place. I never saw a settlement except the one I grew up in, and I never had friends to send messages to. Asra was the same. We did learn about history and the gods from the Tal Kumada, but..." he trailed off.

Chikisa looked up at Tanda. "After our mother changed, she didn't want us learning anything from the Tal Kumada. She told us not to believe anything they said the second they left our settlement. She never had a single kind word for them. Other people started to notice how mean and bitter she'd become."

Chikisa frowned again. "I thought that maybe the Ramau did something to make her change like that. She used to secretly attend their meetings. The Tal Kumada didn't know."

"Who are the Ramau?"

"They serve the Tal Kumada as apprentices. They can sense Noyuk. Every child with that power is sent to the Tal Kumada when they turn fourteen. I think Asra would be one of the Ramau if she was old enough."

"Asra can see Noyuk?"

Chikisa nodded uncertainly. "I don't know if she can see it or just sense it, but she definitely has some awareness of it. Mom didn't want

Asra to become one of the Ramau. She always said she didn't want Asra to have the same kind of life she'd had."

"What does that mean? Was your mother one of the Ramau, too?"

"No," Chikisa said. "Ramau can't get married. Mom was never one of them. I don't really understand what she meant by saying things like that. She used to mutter a lot about running away and how she wasn't allowed to have the life she wanted. Something must have happened to her before we were born."

Chikisa sighed and shook his head. "Anyway, I really do think that the Ramau did something to her. They probably poisoned her mind against the Tal Kumada. I listened to the younger Ramau talking to each other sometimes, and what they said wasn't always the same as what the Tal Kumada told us. Their meetings were always secret. Whenever mom came back from one of them, she seemed--it's hard to explain. Impassioned? Crazy? She would sit Asra and me down in front of her and tell us all the ways that the Tal Kumada were wrong. It seemed...fun, for her to do that. It was the only time she seemed to be completely content."

Chikisa blushed. He was clearly embarrassed to be telling Tanda these things about his mother. "Asra loved our mom a lot and believed everything she said. I...had doubts. I didn't like what my mom was turning into. But Asra was different--she loved seeing mom happy. Asra probably still believes what she taught us."

Tanda took a sip of water from a jar, then wiped the lip of the jar and handed it to Chikisa. "Tell me a little more about Asra. What's she like?"

Chikisa stared at the water jar in his hands without drinking from it. "Asra was always quiet. She did as she was told. She's shy, but she has strong beliefs and it's hard to change her mind. She never hurt anyone before...before this. I still don't understand why all of this is happening." Chikisa's lower lip trembled as he stared into the water jar.

"No one stopped our mother from doing what she did. If they'd stopped her, corrected her, helped her maybe..." He shook his head.

“Maybe she wouldn’t have been executed. Maybe Asra wouldn’t have Talhamaya’s power.”

Tanda extended his hand and rested it awkwardly on Chikisa’s shoulder. Chikisa’s back was rigid from the effort of holding back tears.

“Why can Asra use Talhamaya’s power in the first place? Did your mom do something?”

Chikisa shrugged. “Yeah, but I don’t know what she did. I didn’t see it. After dad died, the other trappers came around one day to help us check his traps. I remember Asra saying something strange.” He looked Tanda in the eyes. “When she was walking in the woods after the trappers, she told me she felt a lot warmer in a certain spot than anywhere else. The Tal call that spot Noyuk Chai--it’s a place where water from Noyuk gathers in pools, apparently. I never noticed it being warmer or colder than anywhere else.

“Asra seemed agitated. She wouldn’t keep still. She kept asking me if I could hear something. She looked like she was staring at something that wasn’t there. I thought she was acting really weird.”

Chikisa seemed to be lost in his memories. “I thought maybe she was sleepwalking or dreaming or something. Mom took her away somewhere that night; I don’t know where. Maybe she took her to the Ramau. Asra didn’t tell me anything. Neither did mom.

“At midnight the day after that, mom took us both to the temple of Talhamaya. We went inside, but mom kept walking further in to the forbidden place that no one’s allowed to enter. The forbidden place is Sada Talhamaya’s grave. I tried to stop her--I told her I wouldn’t go in there--but she didn’t listen.

“I saw moss growing on the rocks of the temple. The Hasal Ma Talhamaya river flows between them. I saw it flowing there, though I’d never seen it before. It was midnight, so it was completely dark, but the water in the river just, um....*glowed*. I can’t really explain it. The moss seemed to mark the current of the river. I couldn’t really tell if it was the moss that was glowing or the river.

“Mom told me to hide in the shadow of a huge tree. Then she took Asra and followed the line of the river. I saw her and Asra walk between two large stones and disappear. They didn’t come out for a long time.”

He paused. “I didn’t see them again until dawn. Mom seemed surprised when she noticed the sun coming up. I don’t think she expected to be gone that long. She probably wanted to sneak back home under cover of darkness.

“The Tal Kumada came to the temple to perform morning prayers. That’s how they caught us.” Chikisa didn’t want to talk about what happened next. Tanda wasn’t sure he wanted to hear it, either. He could make a fair guess about what must have happened based on what Sufar had told them before...but there was still one thing that he had to know. He felt that if he didn’t ask Chikisa outright, he’d never get an answer.

“Chikisa,” Tanda said, “did Asra...do something at Shintadan?”

Chikisa’s expression twisted in pain. He wished Tanda hadn’t asked him that, but he understood why he had. Chikisa took a deep breath. “Mom was going to be executed that night. They bound our arms, all of us, so we couldn’t do anything. They brought me and Asra to the execution site. There were a lot of other people there--they came to watch. Some people seemed just as sad and scared as we were, but a lot of them were...were laughing.” Chikisa’s voice shook. “I wanted to kill the people who were laughing. They were cruel. I screamed and begged them all to save our mom, but no one did anything.”

Tanda gripped Chikisa’s arm. He wanted to tell him that it was all right and that he didn’t have to say anything else, but he had to know what happened.

Chikisa swallowed hard. “When...when mom was killed, I heard something. Something loud. People screamed all around us. Asra looked up. I saw her eyes roll back in her head. Something twice as big as her just kind of...shot out of her chest. It was so bright that I couldn’t really see it.

“What happened next took less than a second. All the people around us collapsed. It was like a strong gust of wind passed over them and

made them all fall down. I blinked, and suddenly all of them were dead. Even the guards restraining us fell dead instantly. I held on to Asra and didn't let go.

"Lots of people from the fortress came running toward the execution yard. I saw that thing chase them down and kill them, too. It looked like--like glowing light, like the light I saw at Talhamaya's river. A lot of people ran when it attacked them, but none of them got away."

Tanda felt goosebumps on his arms.

Chikisa's eyes filled with tears. "We're murderers. So many people died, and I...I didn't run. I watched. I...I should have killed Asra, then myself."

"Chikisa..."

Tears streamed down Chikisa's face. His shoulders shook as he cried. "I don't think Asra remembered any of it. Visiting Sada Talhamaya's grave and mom's execution seemed like hazy memories for her. None of this is Asra's fault. If mom hadn't entered the forbidden place and broken the Tal people's vow not to visit Sada Talhamaya's grave, none of this would have happened.

"I want to believe that all of this isn't our fault, but more and more people keep getting caught up in it. There seems to be no end in sight, and I don't know how to fix it."

Chikisa covered his face with his hands and said through his tears, "I want to see Asra. I want to tell her everything before she kills anyone else. I want to fix everything and just make an end of it, but I don't know how, and, and..."

Tanda wrapped his arms around Chikisa in a gentle hug. Chikisa sobbed into Tanda's chest.

"I'm so sorry! I never wanted you or Balsa to suffer because of us."

Tanda hugged Chikisa more tightly. "You didn't get us mixed up in any of this. That was our choice. We did what we did because we wanted to help you. I still do. Even if I die, it's not your fault." He wished he could speak Rotan better; he couldn't put everything he wanted to say into Rotan words.

Tanda kept his arms around Chikisa and stared at the walls of the prison jar. He hadn't completely believed Sufar when he'd told him about Chikisa and Asra, but it seemed that Sufar had been telling the truth. Asra really was dangerous.

Balsa.

She was probably heading for Jitan so she could rescue them. Balsa was caught between two separate dangers: Shihana's trap and Asra's power. He needed to warn Balsa somehow before she reached Jitan.

Tanda sat and stared at the walls of the prison jar for a long time. He and Chikisa passed the entire day inside the jar. It started to get a little harder to breathe as the sun started going down. Tanda felt entirely trapped and helpless as darkness fell.

Should I try to send my soul wandering?

Chikisa had fallen asleep sometime in the middle of the day; he was still sleeping. Tanda listened to his soft and even breathing as he considered what to do. Shihana was a magic weaver; she knew that he could project his soul. There was a good chance that she'd already set a trap so that he wouldn't be able to contact Balsa or Torogai. If Shihana managed to catch his soul and prevent it from coming back to his body, he'd become a soulless husk--and, eventually, die.

That line of thinking wasn't encouraging, not least because it didn't get him anywhere. He had to find some way to warn Balsa. If he could sidestep Shihana's trap, he might be able to find some way for him and Chikisa to escape. This was a sink-or-swim situation. He couldn't possibly succeed without risking failure, so he decided that he'd have to risk falling into Shihana's trap. He couldn't just sit here doing nothing.

The moment he made his decision, the lid of the prison jar opened. Tanda looked up and identified a slight, crouched-down figure peering into the jar. They looked a little like a thief. Tanda rubbed his eyes to clear them and squinted in the half-dark, trying to see better.

A rope landed in Tanda's lap.

"Climb to the middle of the rope," the man above him whispered.

Chikisa startled awake. He looked at Tanda, who nodded. The two of them pressed their backs against the curved wall of the prison jar and waited.

The man above them jumped down, graceful and silent. He pulled something out of his clothing and turned to face Tanda and Chikisa with a tiny ball of fire in his hand. In the dim light, Tanda could just make out his features.

“Sufar.”

Sufar lifted his hand in a silencing gesture. He stood still and listened for a moment, then handed the end of the rope he’d dropped into the jar to Tanda.

“Tanda,” he whispered, “you need to get out of here. Climb the rope, now!”

Tanda frowned at Sufar. “What about Chikisa?”

Sufar shook his head. “Chikisa has to stay here.”

Tanda let go of the rope. “I’m not leaving here without him.”

Sufar thrust the rope back into Tanda’s hands and said in a tone of irritation, “Listen. Shihana won’t harm Chikisa. She wouldn’t dare. You have to believe me. I know what she’s planning now.”

Sufar snapped his mouth shut and looked at Chikisa. “When Shihana comes back, she’ll let Chikisa out. She won’t do anything that would threaten his life. I expect she’ll treat him a lot better than she’s treated you both so far.”

Sufar returned his gaze to Tanda. “But she’ll kill you, Tanda. I’m sure of it. Chikisa is the only one she needs. If we take him with us, she’ll call on all her allies and come after us. There’s no way she’ll let us get away if we take him.”

There was a long silence.

“Please, Tanda,” Chikisa whispered. “Go. Leave me here.” His voice was quiet, but he seemed resolute. “I’ll be all right. And if you get away, maybe you can...” he trailed off.

Tanda could tell that he wanted to say more, but telling Tanda to leave him had cost him something. He didn't want to be left alone here.

Tanda squeezed Chikisa's shoulder. "Staying here alone will be horrible for you. I know it. But I promise you that I'll find Asra. I'll do everything I can to save her so that you can see each other again. I promise."

Chikisa grabbed Tanda's hand and held on.

"I'm sure you'll see your sister again," Sufar said. "Shihana will probably think of a good story to explain away her imprisonment and treatment of you so far. She's going to try to convince you that she's justified. Chikisa, when she does that, I want you to think hard about why the Tal people live in the shadows. Remember the history of Rotarbal that I told you whenever Shihana tries to talk to you about the Tal people."

"Remember the history of Rotarbal? What does that even mean?"

Sufar shushed Chikisa. "We don't have time. I wish we did. Forgive me. Tanda, climb the rope. We have to hurry."

Tanda squeezed Chikisa's hand, then dropped it. He retrieved the rope, lined himself up facing one curved wall of the prison jar, then pushed off the wall with his feet as he started to climb. As he neared the top of the open jar, he smelled damp grass.

Tanda's hands gripped the lip of the prison jar. A man seized him strongly by the wrists and pulled him roughly out of the jar. Tanda stumbled and nearly fell, but the man paid him no mind. He grabbed the end of Sufar's rope and started rolling it up with neat, efficient movements.

The air outside the jar was so cold that Tanda's teeth chattered. He saw a river in front of him. The riverbank he stood on was high and angled upwards away from the river. Tiny points of light shone from the other side of the river. He could smell smoke somewhere nearby.

As his eyes adjusted to the light outside the jar, Tanda caught sight of two men walking along the other side of the riverbank. They were coming closer.

Sufar climbed nimbly out of the jar and landed next to Tanda. “The next set of guards is coming,” he said. “We need to run.” Sufar grabbed Tanda’s arm and dragged him toward the river. There was a small boat concealed in the tall grass near the shore. The man that had pulled Tanda out of the prison jar helped Tanda board the boat before climbing in himself. Sufar untied the boat’s mooring rope from around a small tree, then leaped into the boat.

The man Tanda didn’t know knelt in the bottom of the boat and seized a long piece of wood that looked like a rudder. Sufar also got to his knees at the head of the boat and hauled up two oars that were attached to the boat’s sides.

The small boat slipped into the current of the river as easily as a fish. Sufar and the other man started breathing in time with one another. As the man steered and Sufar rowed, the boat gradually picked up speed.

The boat seemed to move silently; even Sufar’s rowing blended in perfectly with the soft sussurations of the water around them. The small lights Tanda had seen lining the river on either side faded into the distance.

“This is the river Rawal,” Sufar said. “The lights we passed were gaps for ventilation that the Kashal use in their underground homes. Distant cousins of my mother live in this area. The head of the village we just left is a young man named Kafam. He’s Shihana’s cousin.”

Sufar’s words came in interrupted spurts as he used his breaths to time out the strokes with his oars. ”Shihana’s crafty, but she doesn’t know everything. Age has its advantages. I know a lot of history that the younger Kashal don’t. I also have friends that Shihana doesn’t know about.”

Sufar laughed low in his throat. “I was just imagining her surprise when she finds out I’ve run off.” Sufar’s laugh echoed across the water in the gathering darkness until it finally faded away.

Part 2: The Trap

Chapter 1 - To the Trader's Market

The night after the terrible wolf attack, the caravan was blessed with suspiciously clear weather. The line of sight was clear for long distances in every direction. The fresh snow deposited by the blizzard made the whole world look like an untrammeled white sheet.

Naka and the others Asra had saved spent the night in the herders' huts. No one slept well. Most of them had nightmares all night and didn't wake up until well past dawn. Asra and Mina both caught fevers; Marona and the other women of the caravan stayed up all night soothing them with damp forehead cloths and speaking to one another in hushed whispers.

A wolf had bitten through Balsa's left hand and arm. The wound was deep, painful and needed immediate treatment. Even after Balsa cleaned and wrapped the wound and laid down to sleep, it hurt so badly that she couldn't.

Usually when she was in a situation like this, her body pressured her to be calm and ignore all pain in favor of resting and getting well quickly, but pain wasn't the only reason Balsa couldn't sleep. There was a cold, hard lump shifting around in her chest; she didn't know where it had come from. She wanted to sleep deeply and without nightmares, but that was impossible: when Balsa closed her eyes, the first thing she saw was Asra's smiling face as she'd killed the wolves. That smile was entirely unlike her usual smile. A feverish light had glittered in her eyes. Balsa eventually fell into a restless sleep and dreamed all night about the warm wind that cut down the wolves and the look on Asra's face. When she woke up the next morning, the sense impressions of her nightmares lingered.

The herders went out to perform their morning chores at dawn, leaving only Balsa, Naka and the others from the caravan inside the hut.

The front door of the hut slammed open, revealing Ren on the other side.

"Looks like the snow is freezing to ice," Ren said gruffly. His loud voice echoed off the walls.

Ren crouched down next to Naka, who had just awakened, and said more quietly, "The wheels of the carts might slide, but they won't get buried or stuck in the snow. We might be able to make it to the Trader's Market today if we hurry. I've already told my men that we're leaving this morning. What about you?"

Naka appeared vaguely nauseated. He considered what Ren had said for a moment, then nodded hesitantly. "I guess we should go, too," he said. His voice was no louder than a whisper. Several of the horses had lost their shoes in the woods or the cattle pens during their confinement. They'd need new ones before Naka's caravan could depart. They'd also have to check the spokes of all the wheels on the carts to make sure they were sound and repair any that were broken. A broken wheel on the icy terrain would be a disaster.

There was a mountain of work to do. Naka looked at the bleary faces of the people around him. Last night's attack had worn everyone out.

Ren stood up and said, "All right, we need to get ready. We're all tired, but I know we'll regret it if we miss this chance. Don't worry about your horses and carts. My men will help yours. We'll get your horses reshoed if you check our wheels for us."

"Thank you," Naka said. "I hope I can repay your generosity one day."

Ren slapped Naka hard on the shoulder. "I'll hold you to that," he said with a short laugh.

After Ren left, Naka's people stirred and began their preparations for departure. Balsa checked on Asra and Mina, who were still asleep. Their faces were flushed with fever, but their breathing was deeper and more even than it had been last night, which relieved Balsa somewhat.

"They'll be fine if they ride in the wagons," Marona said quietly.

Balsa nodded, then thanked Marona for looking after Asra overnight.

Marona was clearly exhausted, but she smiled. “Last night was...” She shook her head. “It’s hard for me to even think of what happened. I thought we’d all be killed by the wolves. I’m glad we were saved, but I don’t understand why or how we were.”

None of Naka’s people had spoken about the events of the previous night. None of them wanted to. They’d seen a pale sort of light and felt the wind killing the wolves, but they didn’t know that Asra had caused that to happen.

Balsa considered that fortunate. Everyone’s focus in that terrifying moment had been the wolves, so all they’d really seen was the wolves dying.

Balsa nodded to Marona and stood up. She left the hut to look for Shisoya, one of Ren’s guards. She found him leaning against the wall of another hut while studying a map. When he noticed Balsa, he raised a hand in greeting.

“I heard about last night. Are you all right?”

Shisoya was a stoic man with a flat affect; he didn’t usually display such concern openly. Balsa regarded him seriously for a moment, then untied the bandage over her left hand and arm. The wound was clean and tightly stitched closed.

“The wolf didn’t bite through any arteries, so I’ll be fine. I think I’ll be able to move the arm normally in three days. The hand might take a little longer.” She paused. “Until then, it looks like I have no choice but to protect the right side of the caravan.”

Shisoya nodded. “I’ll protect the left side, then.”

Shisoya dropped his gaze to the map he was holding. “Well reach the Trader’s Market tonight, if we’re lucky,” he said. “But we might run into problems...call it four days after that.”

Balsa nodded thoughtfully. “Shahal mine shaft is a famous gathering place for bandits and thieves. We’ll have to pass right through it,” Balsa said.

Many caravans gathered together at the Trader’s Market that they were heading for. The market was surrounded by high walls and all the

caravan leaders pooled their resources and shared their guards with one another. Because of this, the Trader's Market was generally a safe place for both local and foreign caravans to do business.

The problem was that after a caravan's business was concluded, they would walk right into Shahal mine shaft with their purses fat from purchases made at the market. There was no other way to Toluan--the next large Rotan market city--that didn't go through the mine shaft. The road from the Trader's Market would get narrower and rougher as cliffs rose to either side of it. It was easy for archers to lie in wait on top of the cliffs and pick off caravans from the safety of their high vantage point. Many caravans had been completely wiped out by thieves and bandits that prowled the area around the mine shaft.

The Shahal clan did send warriors to protect the road leading to the mine shaft, but the mine shaft itself was a maze of uncharted tunnels, so most of the time the bandits managed to hide from or sneak around the Shahal clan's patrols.

There was a rumor that some of the bandits had paid the head of the Shahal clan to look the other way when caravans were attacked. Others said that members of his family had been bribed, but no one knew for sure if the rumors were true. Caravans often sent gifts to the clan head and his family in order to ensure safe passage for their people and goods. The clan head used the extra money to increase the number of guards and patrols surrounding the mine shaft.

"I hope we meet up with another caravan before we get there," Shisoya said. "I think the blizzard will make our movements easy to guess for a little while. It's reasonable to expect that we'll be in danger there."

Shisoya outlined some common scenarios for what might happen to the caravan in the coming days. As Balsa listened to him and added her own thoughts and observations, the lingering fear from her nightmares faded away.

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Naka and Ren's caravans didn't come within sight of the high walls of the Trader's Market until very late that night. They unpacked their things in comfortable lodgings and took advantage of hot water piped in to the inn to take baths. Everyone worked in exhausted but companionable silence as they prepared a meal.

There was no need for guards at the Trader's Market. Balsa, Shisoya and the other guards had two full days of rest while Naka and Ren met up with the other caravan leaders and merchants to make purchases and trade. There was a barracks for caravan guards to use along one of the market's high outer walls. Ordinarily Balsa would have chosen to stay there, but Asra's fever refused to break and she was still weak enough to need carrying. Balsa wound up renting a room for the two of them at an inn with two hard beds and a table. It was spare as rooms went, but there were a few touches to make it more comfortable and homey; the space between the beds was covered with a finely woven rug and a small fireplace was built into the floor.

Asra opened her eyes a little when Balsa laid her out on one of the beds, but she quickly closed them again. The room was cold. Even after Balsa wrapped her in warm blankets, Asra didn't stop shivering.

"I'm going to light a fire right now, so just hold on a little longer," Balsa said. Asra didn't seem to hear her.

There were live coals inside the fireplace. Balsa stirred them up and added firewood. She held her hands out over the fire and stared into the dancing flames. She'd stayed at this same inn several times before when she'd been a child. She'd slept in the same bed Asra was sleeping in now. Jiguro had lit the fires then and wrapped her in blankets so she wouldn't be cold.

Balsa checked that smoke from the fire was traveling up the room's narrow chimney, then stretched herself out comfortably on the room's other bed. In the quiet stillness of the night, she heard a high sound like a whistle; she wondered if there was someone outside the inn. The

whistling became a sad and constant sound; eventually, Balsa fell asleep listening to it.

Balsa awoke a little before dawn. She heard Asra crying in her sleep in the bed next to hers. Asra called out over and over, “Mom! Mom! Please don’t kill my mom!”

She was clearly having an incredibly vivid nightmare. Her body was twisted and curled in on itself. Balsa leaned down over her and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

“Sh, you’re all right. You’re having a bad dream. You can wake up now, Asra.”

Asra didn’t open her eyes, but she took a deep breath and unclenched her fists. She turned her face toward the pillow and stopped crying.

Balsa could see the dim light of dawn through the room’s small westward-facing window. Asra’s breathing steadied and evened out as Balsa watched the sun come up. She looked down at Asra’s sleeping face, which was half-covered in shadow. She must have dreamed about her mother’s execution.

Balsa had heard about the Shintadan massacre from Sufar and Tanda. Sufa had said that the massacre’s cause or source had been an executed woman. Balsa could easily imagine how the people in Shintadan prison fortress had died. She could almost feel the unnatural warm wind and see the piercingly sharp fangs cutting people down. The power to kill all those people had come from Asra, not her mother. Asra had probably unleashed the power of the god the instant her mother died.

A sensation of cold dread came over Balsa. She understood now why Sufar wanted to kill Asra. The thing inside her was terrifying and dangerous.

Asra was crying again. Tears streamed into her open mouth as she slept. She appeared completely innocent and entirely too young to be coping with problems of this scale.

Balsa felt a lump in her throat. She swallowed it down, then gritted her teeth. A lot of people believed in the power of gods. Even if Balsa

accepted that the thing inside Asra was a god, why would a god like that choose a young girl like Asra for such a horrifying destiny?

Balsa crossed the room to her own bed and sat down. She put the shaft of her spear between her knees and rested her forehead against it for reassurance. She closed her eyes.

Saving this girl's life won't be enough. She needs more.

Balsa stayed still and did not move until bright morning sunlight streamed in through the room's small window.

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Asra didn't wake up that morning, but Balsa wasn't too worried. She remembered that Asra had slept a lot after she'd used her terrible power on slave merchants from Sangal that wanted to sell her and her brother. She'd probably wake up on her own in a day or so.

Balsa went to the inn's kitchen and dining area to buy fresh milk and wheat porridge. She separated out portions for herself and Asra on a tray, then returned to their room.

Balsa heard voices on the other side of the room's door. She entered the room to find Mina sitting next to Asra on her bed. Asra was awake and sitting up . Mina waved at Balsa.

"So you're up," Balsa said. "How do you feel?"

Asra gave her a sleeping grin. "I feel fine. Just really tired."

"That's probably because of the fever," Mina said. "I felt the same way when I woke up." She spoke in precise and deliberate Rotan in a voice that sounded very like her mother's.

Mina's eyes fell on the tray Balsa was carrying. "As! Is that Asra's breakfast?"

"Yes. Did you eat already, Mina?"

"Yeah, I ate." Mina lifted the lid over Asra's bowl of porridge and looked inside. "Huh? This doesn't have any sakkau in it." Sakkau was extracted from dried fruit to add sweetness to foods. "They put it in mine," Mina said.

Balsa laughed. "You're probably staying at a more expensive inn. They must serve better food there."

"Hm. If they give us anything sweet at lunch, I'll bring some for Asra."

Asra patted Mina on the head. "Thanks, Mina. I appreciate it."

Mina giggled, then hugged Asra. "The wolves were so scary! Mom got so mad at me for running off. She said we were lucky not to be eaten! Who saved us? I didn't see anything. Someone must have killed the wolves for us, right? Asra, did you see anything?"

Asra pulled back from Mina a little so that she could look at her. "I'm sure a god must have saved us. You prayed with all your might to save

your dad, so I think a god must have answered your prayers."

Asra looked over at Balsa and smiled.

Balsa didn't smile back. Asra called the terrifying thing inside her a god. Balsa had trouble seeing Asra as the kind-hearted girl she knew and as a mass murderer that had killed dozens of people with no visible remorse.

Balsa still ached to her soul whenever she thought about the people that had been killed to preserve her own life. The memory of blood-soaked battlefields where she'd killed so many made her wince. She didn't think any amount of time would heal the scars on her soul.

Balsa had a sudden flash of insight: Asra created separation between herself and the god so that she wouldn't experience guilt. Asra prayed to the god; the god answered her prayers. Asra wasn't the one who killed people: the god was.

Asra's smile was sweet and genuine. She seemed entirely at peace with herself. The god had only been able to kill the wolves and the people at Shintadan because of Asra's express invitation, but she didn't seem to think of herself as the cause of their deaths. Something within Asra had changed after killing the wolves; she wasn't shy or fearful any longer. Maybe she wasn't afraid of anything anymore. She could probably save her brother easily; perhaps that thought eased her mind.

Balsa felt a chill go through her entire body. She felt the same way now as she had when she'd watched Asra slaughter the wolves with a smile on her face. Balsa couldn't allow Asra to invite the god to use her ever again. Asra would kill more people if she invited the god into herself again. It would be too late to take back the damage if that happened; there was no way to un-kill or un-injure someone after the fact. Regret wouldn't help anything, either. The suffering Asra would cause if she called on the god again would follow her for the rest of her life.

When you point your spear at someone, you're also pointing it at your own soul.

Jiguro had told her this after almost every battle they'd fought together. Balsa breathed it out silently whenever she killed a person. She could feel their deaths in her hands and in her weapon. She remembered looking down at a man she'd just killed; his mouth had been a hideously ugly bloody gash. She'd turned around, and then...

Balsa reminded herself that Asra was still young. She understood only that the god could answer her prayers and save her brother. She didn't understand fully what she'd done yet, but she would someday. She would have to face the fact that the god's desire to rip out throats and her own desire to kill to save herself were one and the same.

I can't let her stain her hands with any more blood.

Balsa was sure that Asra didn't intend to live her life while causing deliberate harm to others. Balsa remembered Jiguro's face when he'd first given her the spear that he'd made for her. His eyes had been full of a profound sadness that she hadn't truly understood until now. Jiguro had known that Balsa would kill people in the future. Balsa hadn't foreseen that kind of life for herself; she hadn't had any idea. She'd been overjoyed at being given such a precious gift as a spear made by Jiguro. Even though she'd done plenty of things with that spear to cause herself pain and regret, she couldn't imagine her life without it.

The beast of rage inside me is hungrier than any wolf.

Balsa did her best to keep herself under control at all times, but something within her always wanted to fight. The beast twisted and writhed inside her, longing to be released.

But Asra had no love for the spear or for fighting. She loved clothes that smelled like flowers. Her desires weren't as ugly or as violent as Balsa's--not yet. If Balsa could find some way to separate Asra from the god, she might still get to live a happy and peaceful life. Asra didn't have to hurt anyone else.

"Asra, I'm going to the market," Mina said. "Come with me! Please?"

Mina's cheerful voice snapped Balsa out of her thoughts. Asra looked like she really wanted to go with Mina, but she shook her head. It would

be bad for her to go out in public with so many people around. Someone might recognize her.

“I’d like to, but I still feel so weak...”

“Hm. Well, sleep a little bit and then maybe we can go out later. The market is full of all kinds of interesting stuff.”

Asra looked up at Balsa hopefully.

“I’ll take you to the market later,” she said. “I have some errands to take care of there.”

Asra’s face lit up. Mina waved at her with an energy that seemed to contradict her recent fever, then left the room.

“Are we really going to the market later?” Asra asked. “Is it safe?”

“This is a Trader’s Market, so there are more foreigners here than there are Rotans, at least at this time of year. There’ll be Tal trappers selling furs as well. I don’t think we’ll attract too much attention.”

“But what if Sufar’s there?”

“He already knows where we’re going. There’d be no point in following us while we’re here. In fact, it might be useful to us if Sufar or one of his spies showed up. We could ask them what they’re planning.”

Balsa sat down on her bed and showed Asra how to eat the wheat porridge without spilling any on herself. Asra didn’t seem hungry; she pulled a face while lifting the first bite of porridge into her mouth. Then she swallowed and realized the porridge tasted better than she’d thought it would; she started eating rapidly and greedily.

Balsa’s emotions briefly overwhelmed her again. These two days of rest were precious; she couldn’t waste them. She needed to find out what Sufar had planned for them in Jitan. She was glad to be in the Trader’s Market. Both goods and information were readily available here.

Chapter 2 - Sharp-Eared Tajiru

Balsa and Asra put on shuma face coverings and brought their hoods up all the way so that only their eyes were visible before heading to the market. The Trader's Market was surrounded on all sides by flat grassland, so even its high walls weren't enough to keep out the cold wind. Most of the people Balsa and Asra passed were as bundled up as the two of them were, so they didn't stick out nearly as much as Asra had feared.

The general layout of the Trader's Market resembled that of many small towns in Kanbal. The outer walls limited how large the city could grow. Inns for travelers lined the outer walls on every side; the market itself was in the very center inside a huge circular building with a domed roof to shed snow. All trade, buying and selling was done inside that building. Because of northern Rota's long, harsh winters, many caravan owners and merchants had pooled their resources to build this completely indoor marketplace so that trade could be conducted year-round independent of weather.

Jitan was a little further to the south; its market operated within the walls of the city's castle. Asra knew that much; she understood markets having walls, but she'd never seen one with a roof over the entire thing before.

Balsa led Asra through the large front-facing doors of the Trader's Market. Asra's mouth dropped open in shock. The ceiling was high and supported by many pillars; Asra could see that it was made of slatted wood woven together. There were no walls anywhere. Stores and food stands were lined up in front of Asra as far as her eyes could see.

Asra heard a noise so loud that it hurt her ears. Merchants called out to customers and to one another, showing off items for sale; their voices echoed off the dome above, creating a cacophony of sound. There were small openings in the dome to let in light and air; white shafts of light

illuminated the market from above. Asra saw dust particles dancing in the sunlight.

Vegetables, dried fruit, grains and meat were all sold in food stores lined up in front of Asra and Balsa. There were also food stands that sold ready-made meals and fried foods. Weapons and armor were sold near the back of the dome. In between the food and weapons were furriers and clothiers selling furs, cloth, and finished clothing.

At the very edges of the dome, Asra saw Tal fur traders. The curved edges of the dome hid most of their stores in shadow. Asra's heart beat faster as she caught sight of them: there were so many. She'd never seen so many Tal people in one place. Not all of the people she saw looked like trappers; maybe some were merchants that bought their stock from other Tal people?

My dad must have been like the Tal fur traders here. He went to markets to sell pelts.

There were women selling furs as well. One of the women stared at Asra as she and Balsa passed. Asra wasn't sure how she knew the woman was staring at her, specifically; her face was completely covered by her hood and shuma, but she could definitely feel the woman's eyes on her.

Balsa walked fast, so Asra had to pay attention and hurry to keep up. Asra walked past the woman staring at her without saying a word, but the woman's eyes tracked Asra long after she walked by.

Balsa also realized that the woman was staring at Asra, but she decided to ignore her. She didn't know if associating with the Tal people gathered here would be a good idea or not, so she didn't want to make a scene. The Tal people might know something that could be useful to her. Balsa decided to wait until full dark and choose a place to talk to them where they couldn't be easily observed.

Balsa followed the outer edge of the market until she neared the stores selling weapons. Huge numbers of spears and swords were displayed in a long line in front of her. These stores usually did the least business, so this particular place in the market was unusually quiet. For

most people, buying weapons was more intimidating and expensive than buying food.

A large screen separated the stores selling weapons from the ones selling cloth and furs. Balsa stepped around the screen and entered a surprisingly large clear space. One of the pillars supporting the ceiling formed a partial barrier on the far side and bright red cloth surrounded it on all sides, creating something like a walled interior room.

There was a fire in the very center of the space. A man with skin the color of tanned leather sat on a long bench near the fire, smoking a pipe and drinking a cup of milk tea. He was a large man whose build tended more to fat than muscle. His eyes sparkled with intelligence, but his expression was guarded and closed-off.

Balsa could hear a steady sound like water flowing through pipes somewhere out of sight.

The man looked up at Balsa and Asra as they approached the fire. Asra squeezed Balsa's hand tighter and hid behind her. As Balsa removed her face covering, the man's eyes lit up in recognition.

"Huh, is that Balsa the spear wielder I see? It's been a long time." His voice was loud and pitched low, like the sound of a cow lowing.

"It really has. I hope you've been well, Tajiru."

Tajiru laughed. "Yeah, more or less." He shifted in his seat and looked straight at Asra. "Is that your daughter? I find that hard to believe...unless she's a bastard child? That seems more likely."

“Don’t be stupid, Tajiru. I know she’s wearing a shuma, but you should be able to tell that she’s Tal.” Balsa took a seat on a bench in front of Asra. “If you’re going to waste my time with such wrongheaded assumptions as that, how do you expect me to trust any of the information you have for sale?”

Tajiru grinned at her. “Sharp as ever, I see.” His smile collapsed. “I’m sure you’re curious about something in particular. What is it?”

Balsa shrugged. “I’m not sure if you have the information I need. Maybe I should go ask one of the Tal trappers I saw on my way over here.”

Tajiru scratched his beard. “Oh...um...”

Balsa's lips twitched upward in a tiny smile. "I know all about your bottomless appetite for news and information," she said. "You'll probably sell everything you know about us to the Tal traders as soon as we leave. Am I wrong?"

Tajiru chuckled. "Well, probably. I owe you and Jiguro a lot, but he also screwed me over more times than I can count. It's a good thing he saved my life so many times to balance that out."

Tajiru lowered his voice and began speaking in a more serious tone. "The second son of the Shahal clan came to me recently. He asked me to let him know if I saw a female spear wielder leading around a Tal girl."

Balsa frowned at this unexpected piece of news. Why would the Shahal clan be asking after her and Asra? There were hidden agendas here that she didn't know or understand. Like the spreading roots of a tree, the scope of this situation kept stretching farther and deeper than she'd anticipated. A chill went up her spine.

Tajiru smirked at her. "I take it you're interested in hearing more about that?"

Balsa nodded. "I actually thought that it was a magic weaver who was looking for me."

"A magic weaver?" Tajiru sounded genuinely surprised.

"Do you know of a magic weaver called Sufar? He's not much taller or broader than me, but he's definitely a warrior as well as a magic weaver. He usually has a maro hawk on his shoulder."

Tajiru tilted his head to the side. "Can't say I've heard of him. But I do know a little about magic weavers. Do you know anything about Rota's river people?"

"River people?"

"They live on the banks of the Maral and Rawal rivers. They tend to be short and slight. People say they can control animals with magic weaving. When people have problems with evil spirits or curses, they go to the river people and pay them to help. Is that girl there possessed by an evil spirit? They say evil spirits and the Tal people are closely

related. I've heard stories of children with Tal fathers and demon mothers."

Asra's face puckered in distaste. Tajiru was insulting her parents. Her face felt hot.

"What are *you* looking at?" he asked Asra. "You're better at intimidation than you look; I'll give you that."

Balsa was surprised at how much hatred she felt emanating from Asra. Asra was capable of being violent and angry on her own terms, not just when she was possessed by the god. Balsa put her hand on Asra's shoulder and glared at Tajiru.

"It's me you're talking to, Tajiru, not the girl. She's been left in my care. If you insult her, you're insulting me." Her tone was calm and even, but there was something threatening in her demeanor.

Tajiru shrugged. "I was just joking. No need to get mad."

"Your jokes are always in bad taste," the hoarse voice of an old woman cut in suddenly. A pale old woman with a round belly lifted one of the red cloth hangings surrounding the area with the benches and the fire. She carried a small butter churn and churning stick. The sound like flowing water that Balsa had been hearing since greeting Tajiru came from that butter churn.

"Dear mother, how many times have I asked you not to churn butter here?" Tajiru asked. "Why don't you do it at home?"

Balsa sighed as she looked at Tajiru's weary, dejected face. "Here we go again..."

"I can't stand it!" Tajiru said. "Every day you're over there churning. The noise drives me nuts. I'm sure you're stealing food from the store while I'm not looking, too."

Tajiru's mother snorted. "The butter has ears. It tastes better when it can hear interesting tales while it's made."

"Huh? Well, there are no interesting tales here...no wonder your butter tastes terrible."

Balsa noticed that Tajiru and his mother had the same eyebrows. Hers shot up as soon as she saw Asra. She beckoned Asra to come closer with her free hand.

Asra froze in panic. What was she supposed to do?

“Come over by me,” Tajiru’s mother said loudly. “I’ll give you some buttermilk. I can’t give it to my son after what he just said.”

Asra glanced over at Balsa, who nodded. Asra approached the old woman with fearful and hesitant steps. Tajiru’s mother used practiced movements to remove the lid of the small churn she held. She scraped the hardened butter out of the churn and poured the liquid that remained into a wooden cup. She passed the cup to Asra.

Asra took a small sip of the liquid and looked up at Tajiru’s mother with wide eyes. Her own mother had given her buttermilk a few times, but it had never tasted this good. Even the smell of the buttermilk was rich and sweet.

Tajiru’s mother smiled at her. She washed the lump of butter in her hands with water and placed it onto a clean dish. She shaped the butter into a large pat and sprinkled it with salt. “It’s delicious, right?” she asked as she worked. “I put secret spices in it,” she said proudly.

When she was done preparing the butter, she faced Balsa and looked her in the eyes. “We haven’t seen you in ages, Balsa. You look as healthy and strong as ever.”

“It’s good to see you again, Kaina. You look just the same as when I saw you last.”

Kaina howled with laughter. “That’s kind of you to say, dear. We can’t expect to go backwards in time, only to slow its progression. You’ve gotten better at compliments, Balsa.” She paused. “I overheard you talking with my son. I don’t think he knows everything that you want to know. He still has a lot to learn.”

“Huh?” Tajiru asked with a stupefied expression. He glared at his mother.

“You don’t even know Sufar,” she said with a little shake of her head. “That’s why I said you have a lot to learn.”

“Does that mean you know Sufar, Kaina?”

Kaina smiled enigmatically and pushed Tajiru a little to the side on his bench so that she could sit down next to him. “Do you know where I lived and worked in my younger years?” she asked.

Balsa shook her head and waited for Kaina to continue.

“I worked as a chef in the kitchens of the castle at Jitan.” Her chest swelled with pride. “Around the time this girl was born, I was the head chef in those kitchens.”

Tajiru looked tired. “Be careful, Balsa. She’ll talk your ears off if you let her.”

Kaina glared at him. “At least I’m better than my old man, who told the same long story about himself over and over again. I’ll stick to the basics. I promise.

“Anyway,” she said, “there were times when Prince Ihan would stay in the castle. Jitan was the second city that King Kiran built up during his rule, so it’s huge. Unlike the castles and fortresses of the other clan lords, Jitan’s castle was built specifically to house the royal family. Discipline was severe and impeccable manners were expected. I worked there for almost fifty years. News and rumors from all over reached the kitchens all the time. Tajiru is only successful now because of my connections and our experiences at Jitan’s castle.”

Tajiru looked sullenly at her, but he didn’t interrupt.

Kanai’s tone waxed nostalgic as she said, “After my husband died, I raised Tajiru by myself. I often went to bars after work and listened to the men talking. I met Jiguro right around that time. Do you remember, Balsa?”

Balsa smiled a little and nodded. Kanai had looked a lot different in those days. Balsa remembered how her laugh had echoed through the whole bar whenever she drank with the men. She could wheedle information out of almost anyone.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget drinking with Jiguro.” She paused. “Your eyes were so bright when you looked at him. You were too skinny then, not much more than skin and bones, but you always had a great strength of will. Watching Jiguro raise you to be a bodyguard was one of the most interesting things I’ve ever seen.”

Kanai slapped her hands against her knees and leaned forward. When she spoke again, her voice was no louder than a whisper. “Tajiru can be stingy with what he knows if he likes, but I’ll tell you everything for the sake of our old friendship. The river people are magic weavers, but there’s another side to them, too. They’re spies for Rota’s royal family. Even powerful clan heads and their families are afraid of them. I met several of them lurking around the castle at one time or another. They told fortunes on auspicious days or worked some magic weaving to protect the people of the castle from curses. They also carried messages--a lot of them.”

Balsa remembered her encounter with her and Asra’s pursuers and nodded deeply. The river people were like the Mikado’s Hunters in New Yogo. They were excellent trackers, spies and assassins that served the royal family.

“I see,” Balsa said, “but what does the second son of the Shahal clan have to do with any of this?”

Kanai’s eyes flashed. “I was getting to that, but there’s something else you should know first. Are you familiar with Rota’s current politics? Do you know much about Prince Ihan?”

Balsa tilted her head to one side. “I’ve heard rumors. I know the southern lords hate him, but he doesn’t seem to pay much attention to them. I’ve also heard that he’s a great reformer. He wants to change Rota.”

Kanai nodded at Balsa with a satisfied expression. “I should’ve expected nothing less from you. You know how to keep your ears open. I’ve known Prince Ihan ever since the last Crown Prince of Rota died and he moved into the castle at Jitan. You’ve spent a lot of time in Rota, so I’m sure you know how much the north hates and resents the south.

The southerners get rich and fat without working for it and leave us to starve. We're hard workers in the north. We're buried in snow and viciously attacked by wolves every winter. And what is our reward for our efforts, aside from poverty? Prince Ihan knows the truth of it. The younger clan lords in the north have thrown their full support behind him," she said fervently. Her eyes locked on Balsa like she was trying to stare through her. "Why are you opposing Prince Ihan?"

"Huh?" Balsa hadn't expected that kind of question at all; the surprise on her face was completely obvious.

Kanai folded her arms. "Are you saying that you *don't* oppose Prince Ihan?"

"I don't oppose him, but I don't support him, either," Balsa said. "I have no idea what you're talking about. This girl and I are being pursued. I can't let Sufar take her. I'm not sure why, but Sufar wants to kill her. He already tried. I couldn't just sit by and watch it happen."

Kanai looked like she'd just swallowed something that tasted bitter. "That's hard to believe. I know Sufar. He can be stubborn, but he's not so cruel or twisted that he'd kill a child. It looks like you've stepped into something that you should have avoided, Balsa."

Kanai looked at Balsa and sighed. "Of course I understand why you couldn't simply let this poor child be killed. You're an orphan, too. Her situation is too similar to yours to ignore. You look intimidating at first glance, Balsa, but you've always been softer than you look."

Balsa blinked at being called "soft," but then she smiled. "I guess I am. But anyone who abandons a stranger in trouble should expect the same treatment when they're the one in trouble, yeah?"

"A wise saying," Kaina said with a nod. She smiled a little before lapsing into seriousness again. "Prince Ihan has always done everything in his power to protect the Tal people. I have no formal education, but I worked for him for a very long time. He'd never do something to deliberately harm a Tal person. I don't think Prince Ihan ordered Sufar to kill this girl."

Kaina sank into silence.

“The northern clans put all their support behind Prince Ihan,” Tajiru said. “You said as much yourself just now. The second son of the Shahal clan is looking for Balsa and the girl. What do you think that means? Maybe Prince Ihan thinks that Balsa’s planning to move against him in some way. I played dumb and tried to find out more from the Shahal clan, but they weren’t forthcoming...I thought this whole situation was strange from the start.”

Kanai looked Tajiru in the eye. “The second son of the Shahal clan has no interest in Rota’s government. He doesn’t usually concern himself with any kind of important work when it comes to politics or reforms. But he’s greedy and self-important, which means he’s easily bought. He’d probably insist that he supports Prince Ihan if you asked him outright, but he’s had dealings with the bandits that attack the mine shaft for years now. Hm.”

Kanai pursed her lips. “It’s odd no matter how you look at it. Sufar and the bandits definitely aren’t on the same side. Their motives and ways of solving problems are completely different.”

Balsa suddenly thought of something. The threatening letter she’d received in Shirogai didn’t seem to fit the picture Kanai was painting of Sufar’s character. Balsa narrowed her eyes as she thought about the letter. The person that had sent it had gone so far as to use Tanda’s name. The tone of the letter was also completely different from Sufar’s usual speech pattern. It must have been written by someone else.

Balsa listened in silence as Kanai and Tajiru speculated among themselves. They were undoubtedly the most well-informed people in the Trader’s Market, but even they couldn’t put all the pieces together to figure out what was really going on.

But Balsa had learned at least part of what she wanted to know. She understood more about her enemies: their essential character, their strengths, their alliances and their capabilities were gradually becoming clear to her. Knowing one’s enemy was the first step to defeating them.

Balsa removed her wallet from her breast pocket, then said, “I’m looking for any good caravan guards that are in town and looking for work. Do either of you know of any?” Balsa and Asra needed to leave Naka’s caravan soon. They’d cause problems for the caravan if they remained with them much longer, but Balsa would be in breach of contract if she didn’t find Naka another guard before they left.

Tajiru stroked his beard as he considered her question. “Sahal would be your best bet, I think. He’s good with a sword, and amiable enough. He’s only recently out of work.”

Tajiru told Balsa where to find Sahal. Balsa paid Tajiru and Kaina for their information, thanked them both and stood up. Tajiru waved at her as she turned to leave. “No need to thank us,” he said. “I can sell what you told me for a pretty good price.”

“Get the highest price you can for it,” Balsa said. “And be nicer to your mother.”

Kanai laughed, then said goodbye. She didn’t say anything else--no words of encouragement or warnings about what might happen in the future. She was not the kind of woman that sneered at fate.

Balsa walked quickly away from Tajiru and Kaina, leading Asra by the hand. She stopped by a food stand and bought milk tea and pastries fried in butter for her and Asra’s lunch.

There were benches near the food stands so that people could sit and eat. Balsa and Asra found an empty bench and sat down. No one else was sitting nearby, but they could still hear the hustle and bustle of the market around them.

Asra picked up her pastry, then looked at Balsa with a worried frown. “Balsa, did those people tell us the truth?”

Balsa nodded. “Yes, they did...though we’ve talked the day away, haven’t we? Talk and news is Tajiru’s trade. Kanai’s, too.” Some of the butter from her pastry lingered in her mouth. It tasted slightly sharp. “I’m sure you’re wondering why we should trust them. I wondered the same thing when I was your age.” She smiled a little. “They’re greedy

for knowledge and very cunning, but they're also good people. We wouldn't know nearly as much as we do now without them."

Balsa set her cup of milk tea down on the bench and wrapped her arm around Asra's shoulders. "When I've been in trouble before, Tajiru and Kanai sent messages to warn me."

Balsa's arm resting on Asra's shoulders was warm and reassuring. "They helped you when you were in trouble?" Asra asked around a mouthful of pastry.

Asra suddenly tensed and swallowed down the words she wanted to say next. Balsa nodded at her to encourage her to speak.

"It's just...you have so much confidence in yourself," Asra said. "It's hard to believe you ever needed help. I wish I could be more like that."

Balsa's eyelid twitched. "I think we might have different definitions of confidence," she said.

I'm not that great, she wanted to say. *Don't envy me*. Jiguro had nurtured her like a sapling in the shadow of a tall tree. Slowly but surely, she'd learned that the mist important thing was not to give up. This was true of both her life and of her chosen profession. Being a bodyguard was a dangerous line of work; people died on the job all the time. Balsa would not have been able to keep working alone after Jiguro's death if she ever so much as considered the possibility of failure.

When she'd first started working alone, she'd been betrayed by someone she trusted. He'd been a well-respected caravan guard that she'd known for years. When the caravan they'd been guarding was attacked, he'd tricked Balsa by using her as a decoy for the bandits. He'd left her to fend for herself while taking credit for himself for saving the caravan.

Her wounds had been so grave after that battle that she'd genuinely feared she would die.

People generally liked the appearance of trust and reliability in a bodyguard. Showing weakness or bitterness in front of people was not a good way to inspire confidence. If Balsa were asked to boil down her

work to its simplest possible terms, she would say that all she really did was prevent people from getting severely physically hurt anywhere, especially the head. As long as she prevented life-threatening injuries, the lives of the people she protected could go on.

It was the same for her. Death and giving up were the same thing. All she ever really did was protect herself. The memory of the people who had died so that she could live only served to strengthen her resolve. She felt like she owed it to them, and to Jiguro, to keep going and live the best life that she possibly could.

A lot of time had passed since those eight men had died, but watching Jiguro kill them had been foundational to the rest of her life. Their terrible sacrifice was what steadied her before a fight. She didn't know if she would still be alive without them, even though she'd never known them in life. They reminded her constantly of why she needed to survive.

But Balsa's tenacity in clinging to survival wasn't something Asra should envy or emulate. Kaina had as good as told her that saving Asra's life would not be enough. She knew it wouldn't be enough. But Balsa still wasn't used to valuing life for its own sake; she didn't know how to instill those feelings in Asra. The happy summer and autumn she'd spent with Tanda as he recovered last year seemed like a dream from someone else's life. She felt like she'd borrowed that time and would have to give it back someday. She had no hopes or dreams for the future, only the immediate present, which was consumed completely by her desperation for survival.

Balsa carried all her old scars with her, mental and physical: she'd carried them since her childhood when she'd been forced to flee Kanbal; they'd still been with her when she'd faced Jiguro's ghost in the Mountain King's hall. Some part of her still opposed her right to have her own life--a life lived for herself rather than others.

Balsa felt like she'd died in the darkness under the mountains in Kanbal and been reborn. She was still trying to rebuild her life, but she didn't know how.

I know as much about living my life as a newborn baby. I don't know anything.

Balsa sat in silence for a long while. She wrapped her arms reflexively around herself as hopelessness and ignorance overwhelmed her. Asra had never seen Balsa uncertain or afraid about anything. She was always as solid as a rock.

She was so strong, and she could do anything--so why did she look so lost?

Balsa took a careful sip of her milk tea. It was cold. "Let's finish eating and find Sahal. We have to get him to take my place in Naka's caravan. Tajiru would have told me if there were any enemies on the immediate road ahead, so Naka's caravan will probably be safe until it gets through the mine shaft."

"We're leaving the caravan here?" Asra asked.

Balsa nodded. "You don't want them to get mixed up in anything dangerous, right?"

"Right," Asra said. It would be just the two of them from this point on. Their enemies were waiting for them in Jitan. Asra imagined Mina's face, and Naka's, and Toshi's. She might never see them again. She felt a profound loneliness that she couldn't describe in words.

"We have no choice but to leave them here," Balsa said. "I'm sorry."

Asra didn't want Mina or the others to be hurt because of her. If she had to be lonely to spare them that, she would.

The god is with me. She felt power flowing inside her. *I don't need to be scared. The god will be with me no matter what.*

Nothing bad could happen with both Balsa and the god protecting her. Any enemies thinking to target a woman and child traveling alone would be in for a surprise.

Asra's lips twitched upward in a smile.

Chapter 3 - Like The Surface of a Lake in Winter

After dinner, Balsa went to talk to Naka about the guard that would replace her in the caravan.

“I’m not sure how satisfied I’ll be with a replacement,” Naka grumbled, “but it can’t be helped. Isn’t it too late in the day to settle that now?”

Balsa brushed aside Naka’s complaints and led him to meet the new guard. When Naka saw Sahal, his mood noticeably improved. He was young and obviously strong, with bright eyes and a pleasant attitude. Tajiru’s recommendation had not steered Balsa wrong.

Balsa passed a portion of her payment back to Naka; she’d promised to follow him to Toluan, which was still a few days away.

Naka looked down at the money in his hand with a complicated expression. “You’re very honest, and a great guard. I wish you could travel with us the rest of the way. Mina’s going to miss Asra.”

Naka faced Sahal and started talking with him about where the caravan was headed. Meeting people, traveling with them and parting with them were everyday occurrences for a caravan owner. Such a brief farewell was perfectly customary.

When Balsa returned to the inn where she and Asra were staying, she found Asra bundled up in her blankets, fast asleep. Balsa sat down on her bed, removed the scabbard from her spear point and inspected it. There was a good forge nearby that had a whetstone. The light reflecting off the blade was so bright that it hurt to look at.

They were leaving tomorrow morning. Balsa decided to travel behind some of the departing caravans for a while. A lot of side roads branched off of the main highway into the mountains; Balsa wanted to find a way to Jitan that would be difficult for people riding horses or carrying luggage to travel. There were probably people in the Trader’s Market

that supported their enemies; those people might be watching her and Asra right now. Balsa considered it possible and even likely that she and Asra would be observed when they left the city, but even if Sufar and their other pursuers learned which caravan they were traveling behind, no one knew every possible path through the mountains. A lot of those paths weren't even marked on maps. Balsa wanted to make them as hard to follow as possible.

Balsa heard footsteps echoing on the stone floor outside the room's door.

"Hello?" a woman asked. "If there's someone in there, there's a person here who wants to see you."

Balsa listened for signs that the woman had company, but she seemed to be alone on the other side of the door. Balsa tightened her grip on her spear and opened the door. "Who wants to see me?" she asked.

The woman frowned. "She didn't give me her name. She's a Tal woman."

Balsa blinked; she hadn't expected that answer. She heard Asra sit up in bed behind her; she must have awakened when Balsa had opened the door.

"Do you want me to send them away?" the woman at the door asked.

"No, it's fine," Balsa said. "Bring her here. I'll talk to her."

The woman nodded and withdrew. She came back a few minutes later, leading another woman whose face was almost entirely hidden by her hood. The visitor made no move to pull back her hood until the inn worker that had led her to the room left and shut the door.

The woman's movements were delicate and graceful as she removed her hood. She was very young and stunningly beautiful. "Thank you for meeting me," she said quietly. "My name is Ianu. Please forgive me for coming to see you so late at night."

Balsa nodded slowly. "Why are you here?"

Ianu's eyes flicked to Asra. "I was in the Trader's Market this morning, selling furs with my friends and family. When I saw you pass by my stall, my heart almost stopped. Asra? It's you, isn't it?"

Asra looked at Ianu with an expression of genuine surprise.

"Do you remember me?" Ianu asked. "We've met before. Your mother brought you to one of our meetings."

Asra felt her heart in her throat. She stared at Ianu, transfixed, and realized that she had seen her before--but only once. Her mother had brought her to a small hut where the Ramau held their secret meetings. Ianu had been there.

"Um, aren't you one of the Ramau?" Asra asked.

Ianu nodded, then wrapped Asra in a gentle hug. Her arms were shaking. Tears fell from the corners of her eyes. "Blessed goddess Afal, thank you for keeping Asra safe!" Ianu sucked in a harsh breath and wept openly with her arms around Asra.

When Asra's face rubbed against the pocket where Ianu kept incense used in temple prayers, she coughed and tried to pull her face away. Suddenly, she saw the image of her mother directly in front of her--hugging her, just like Ianu was. The smell of the incense faded and was replaced by the good clean smell of her mother's hair and skin.

Tears welled up in Asra's eyes, but her arms remained limply at her sides. Ianu wasn't her mom. Ianu had known her mom, but that wasn't the same.

Ianu let go of Asra and looked up at Balsa. "You must have saved her," she said. "Thank you so much for saving her life."

Balsa regarded Ianu uncertainly. She dismissed her thanks with a wave of her hand. "You should sit," Balsa said. "Tell me how you know Asra."

Ianu's cheeks reddened."Yes, I'm sorry. I owe you an explanation." Balsa invited her to sit on her bed; Ianu sat. After Balsa sat next to Asra on the other bed, Ianu talked about her life as one of the Ramau. The Ramau lived in the Shan forest, which was sacred to the Tal

people. Asra's family had lived closer to them than anyone else. Ramau were sent to an enclave inside the forest called Sau when they were fourteen years old. They would live there in service to the Tal Kumada priests for the rest of their lives.

Ianu told Balsa that Ramau could see Noyuk, the world of the Tal gods. They were apprenticed to the Tal Kumada and would inherit their position once they were old enough. Asra's mother Torisha hadn't been able to see Noyuk at all, but she'd still come to visit the Ramau often to learn about the gods.

"I feel so sorry for Torisha. She had such a pure heart. For her to die in such a cruel way is..." Ianu shook her head sadly. "She was too good for this world." Ianu stared at the floor. Her fists balled up in Balsa's blankets.

Ianu glanced up at Balsa. "You're from Kanbal, aren't you?"

Balsa nodded.

"Then you may not have the cultural context to understand everything that's happened," she said. "We Tal people have strong faith in our gods. They protect us. I don't think you know what happened to Torisha, so I'll try to explain as best I can." Ianu gave Balsa a brief summary of the history of Rotarbal. Asra already knew all about it because her mother had told her the same story over and over again. She could almost hear her mother's voice underneath Ianu's as she listened to the story again.

Rotarbal had been a peaceful, united nation led by Sada Talhamaya. Hearing her name again sent goosebumps up Asra's spine. A memory rose up in her mind's eye of the figure of a woman laid out on a stone slab. Her chest had glowed with soft, silvery light.

When Ianu reached the part of the story where Sada Talhamaya was killed by Kiran, Balsa leaned forward. "So...that's how the Kashal wound up working for the royal family, right?"

Ianu nodded. "Both the Kashal and the Tal people originally served Sada Talhamaya. But the Kashal supported the first King of Rota and his clan, and they serve as spies for the royal family even now. They also

watch over the Tal people to ensure that we do not break our ancient promises."

Ianu took a deep breath. "One night, Torisha brought Asra to see us. She said that the sacred river was flowing into our world from Noyuk. She was adamant. I almost thought she'd gone mad. She told us we had to go to the grave of Sada Talhamaya and invite the god into ourselves.

"The other Ramau and I talked with her until well past midnight. We had our doubts about what she was saying; she wasn't able to see Noyuk at all. Had Asra really seen the river flowing? And even if the river truly was flowing again, we had no way of knowing if it was even possible for one of us to unite with the god."

Ianu fixed her eyes on Asra and said quietly, "We thought your mother's conviction and the strength of her beliefs was a sign of the gods' favor. Ultimately, we decided to go to the temple of Talhamaya to pray. We never thought Torisha would go so deeply into the temple as Sada Talhamaya's grave. It's forbidden for any of us to ever go there." Ianu related how Torisha had been caught by the Tal Kumada and handed over to the Kashal in a mournful tone.

Asra started shaking. Balsa put an arm around her shoulders.

"Do you know what happened next?" Balsa asked.

Ianu nodded. "I was at the temple of Talhamaya on the day of Torisha's execution. I saw the water of the sacred river run red with blood. Other Ramau saw it, too. We knew then that Torisha had found some way to bring the god's power into our world."

Ianu cast her eyes down. "It's what she always wanted. She was always looking for a way to bring Talhamaya back to us. It's tragic that she had to die in order to achieve her goal."

Asra stiffened. It suddenly hurt to breathe. *I should probably tell her that I'm the Chamau, not mom*, she thought.

Balsa's grip tightened around her. When Asra looked up at Balsa, the light in her eyes was hard and forbidding. Asra understood that Balsa didn't want her to tell Ianu anything about the god. She gave Balsa a tiny nod. Ianu was a Tal person who had known her mother well, but

Asra still felt apprehensive about telling her how she'd summoned the god.

Ianu lifted her eyes from the floor. "When I heard about the massacre, I was sure that you and Chikisa had both died, Asra. Meeting you here now seems...impossible. Miraculous, even." She paused. "Asra...can I ask you what happened to Chikisa?"

"Well, um..."

"You shouldn't ask her that," Balsa interrupted."It's unkind of you." She told Ianu how Asra and Chikisa had been separated at Rota's border with New Yogo and about their journey here with the caravan. She omitted the wolf attack and most of the details about their pursuers from her account.

Ianu sat and listened to Balsa with a serious expression. When Balsa stopped speaking, she shook her head. "Oh, Asra, you've had such a terrible time! It must have been so awful. I went on a long and difficult journey with my uncle from the south of Rota to the north when I was young, so I can imagine a little of what you've gone through."

Ianu frowned deeply as she remembered all the hardships she'd suffered on her own travels. "My parents were killed by Rotans, too, Asra. I was born in the southern forest of Aruya. My parents traded furs with Rotan merchants. One day, there was some kind of misunderstanding or disagreement at one of the markets where they did their trading, and the merchants killed them. Slaughtered them like sheep."

Unbridled rage burned in Ianu's eyes, but there was something sad in them, too. "The merchants weren't punished. It's not a crime to kill a Tal person. I couldn't stay in a place that had so many frightening and painful memories, so my uncle took me north. Rotans won't set foot in the Shan forest, so it's safe for us."

Ianu gasped and looked up at Balsa. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to tell you my own sad story."

Balsa shook her head. "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

Ianu smiled a tiny smile, but a moment later her forehead crinkled in a frown. “I think I understand why there are people chasing after Asra,” she said. “The sacred river is flowing from Noyuk. If one of the Tal people managed to unite with Talhamaya, that would be dangerous for Rota’s royal family--and all other Rotans as well. Asra must have witnessed what Torisha did at Shintadan. That must be why the Kashal want to hunt down her and Chikisa.”

Balsa felt a chill run down her neck to the base of her spine. Even if it was just speculation, Ianu’s theory made sense. If the Rotan royal family found out about Asra’s ability to summon Talhamaya, they would likely consider her to be too dangerous to live. Balsa suddenly understood the potential motives of Prince Ihan and the second son of the Shahal clan.

Ianu shifted her eyes to Balsa. “What will you do now? The Kashal are formidable opponents. I’m impressed that you managed to get away from them, but rescuing Chikisa when it’s just the two of you is...” She shook her head. Ianu lapsed into silent contemplation for a while, then looked at Asra and said, “I am Tal, but just because I live in the shadows, that doesn’t mean I can openly defy the King. But I also can’t abandon a child of my own people when I know that she’s in danger.”

Ianu’s voice rang with conviction as if she’d just made an important decision. “Come with us,” she said. “I’ll lend you two of our hoods so that you can pass out of the gates with the rest of the Tal people.”

Balsa shook her head. “That’s impossible. There are too many eyes in this place, and not all of them are friendly. I’m sure we’d be spotted. I expect that our pursuers are keeping watch over this inn, too. They probably already know that you visited us.”

“You may be right,” Ianu said, “but I would still feel better if you came with us rather than traveling alone. We have knowledge of paths through the deep woods that no Rotan knows of. We can’t set foot in Jitan, so we’ll be no help to you there, but my people can at least guide you safely to the edges of the city. Please.

“There’s a caravan leaving tomorrow morning. My family and friends will be leaving behind it. Escape this place with us, I beg you. We’ll turn

off the main road into the woods as soon as we're far enough from the Trader's Market for the our movements to pass unseen. I'm sure you'll be able to shake off whoever's following you if you travel with us."

Ianu's plan to leave the Trader's Market was very similar to Balsa's own plan.The Tal people also knew the way to Jitan through the forest so that she and Asra could stay off the road. Going with the Tal people improved their chances of reaching Jitan safely.

"All right," Balsa said. "We'll leave with you. And thanks."

Balsa hammered out the details of when and where they would meet the next morning. Ianu seemed both worried and excited as she left the room.

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Asra stretched out on her bed again. She brought the blankets up to her chin and closed her eyes tight, but she was too wound up to sleep. Balsa was awake as well; Asra heard her moving around the room and packing their things. Asra remembered the time Balsa had fallen asleep with her spear in her hand.

Asra finally drifted off sometime late in the night. She had a series of nightmares, one after another; Ianu had stirred up painful memories that she revisited in her dreams. In her dream, Asra passed through two huge stones and crossed into another world that was bright with phosphorescent light. The air was humid and sticky; she smelled damp earth and moss.

Asra and her mother followed the river that flowed between the stones to a low, clear space lit faintly by moonlight. She saw a woman lying down on a stone slab. It was too dark to see what the woman looked like, but she was entirely submerged in the water of the sacred river. There was a glowing ring of light hovering above her chest.

"The ring of sacred mistletoe," her mother breathed. "Asra, do you see it?"

Asra was surprised. She didn't know that her mother was able to see the sacred river or anything in the other world. "I can see it, mom. Sada Talhamaya is here. She looks like she's floating in the sacred river, fast asleep. The ring of sacred mistletoe is so bright--are you sure you can't see it?"

"I can't," her mother said. She sounded sad and disappointed. "I have no sacred powers. But our gods bestowed those powers upon you, Asra. I hope you know how much I love you. This is an important moment. It's part of your destiny." She paused. "Take the ring of sacred mistletoe, Asra."

But Asra was afraid. "I'm scared."

"It's all right," her mother said. "I'm here with you." Her mother held her hand tightly and started chanting a prayer. Asra held her breath and tentatively reached out for the pale ring of light floating on the surface of the water. She could feel the ring in her hand as she gripped it; it was as light as air. She felt something winding around the little finger of the hand that gripped the ring, but she couldn't see what it was.

The corona of light around the ring of sacred mistletoe flashed. Asra blinked; when she opened her eyes, the ring had been absorbed into her own body. She stared down at her chest as the ring became brighter and brighter.

“Asra!” Her mother sucked in a breath. She took Asra’s hand and started tracing the ring inside Asra with her fingers. The ring’s light shone even brighter; Asra was almost blinded by it.

“Asra.” Her mother was overcome with emotion and could barely speak. She wrapped her arms around Asra and wept.

“You’re going to change the world, Asra! You’ve been chosen, chosen by the god! You’ll become Sada Talhamaya, transcend ordinary human existence, and bring peace to our world. We don’t need to be afraid of anything anymore.”

Her mother knelt down in front of Asra. Her words gathered force and conviction as she spoke. “You must be noble, and high-minded, and

pure of heart for the sake of the god. No one must be above you in any way; you must stand above them all. You must never let any of your feelings show on your face. You must be strong, so that you can unite with the god and show people the way to peace. No matter what happens, you must be as calm and composed as the surface of a lake in winter. Only then will you be worthy to become Sada Talhamaya."

Her mother's words were engraved on Asra's heart. She would never forget them.

The scene of her dream shifted to another terrifying memory: her mother's execution at Shintadan. She saw people collapse around her as they died. Chikisa's eyes were fixed on her in terror and despair--and accusation.

"Chikisa," she gasped, "it's not me! I'm not evil!" she yelled. Her breath came out in ragged gasps. She felt her bed under her and suddenly knew she was awake, but she couldn't shake off what she'd seen in her dream.

The fire in the room had died to embers, so the room was more than half-dark. Balsa rose quickly from her own bed and bent over Asra. "Is everything all right? You were having a nightmare."

Asra felt sweat dripping down her face as she looked up at Balsa. "Chikisa was..." Asra couldn't go on. She swallowed. "He was there. He blames me. He's always in my dreams, and he looks so sad, and scared, and..."

Asra frantically composed herself, but her lips still trembled. She covered her face with her hands. "But I didn't kill them! The god punished them because they were evil!" She kept her hands over her face as she spoke. She could still see everything in her dream clearly even though she was awake.

The execution yard in the prison was dark, but the ring around her neck was bright and getting brighter. Her mother's words of approval and encouragement echoed in her ears. But her mother was dead.

Asra dropped her hands to her sides. Her mother had told her to be as calm as the surface of a lake in winter, but now the ice over her calm

facade was cracking.

"I hated them," she choked out. "I hated them all. I still hate them! They laughed when my mom was killed. They *laughed*!"

Balsa stood up in front of Asra and pulled her gently in so that her head rested against Balsa's chest. Asra clung to Balsa and let out a harsh cry like a scream. This was the first time she'd cried over the loss of her mother. She felt like she was losing her voice.

Balsa felt Asra's wracking sobs against her chest, rising and falling like the ebbing of a tide. She stayed silent and kept her arms around Asra as she cried.

Balsa didn't pull away from Asra until Asra let go of her own volition. Balsa wiped more sweat from Asra's forehead and said, "Asra. I know your brother. He's usually kind to you and he always tells the truth, right?"

Asra looked up at Balsa with eyes that were still wet with tears.

"I think he was telling you your thoughts in your dream," Balsa said.

"My thoughts?"

Balsa turned slowly away from Asra and sat back down on her own bed. She looked at Asra silently for a few moments, then said, "I've hated people before, too. When I was your age, I trained day and night so that I'd become strong enough to kill them all someday. Hatred for them burned inside me all the time. If I wasn't fighting someone with my spear or with my fists, the hatred threatened to tear me apart."

Balsa shared her past with Asra in brief fragments: her father's death at the King of Kanbal's hands, Jiguro's sacrifices to save her from suffering the same fate, and the life she and Jiguro had lived together. Most of her life had been spent fleeing her and Jiguro's pursuers on long journeys that never seemed to end.

"I wanted to become strong as fast as I possibly could. Not just strong: stronger than anyone else. I thought I could save myself if only I were strong enough."

Asra nodded. She was young and weak; she hadn't been able to save her mother. She felt like a small stone crushed beneath someone's heel.

If she became stronger, she'd never have to feel that way again.

"I grew up and became strong," Balsa said, "but that didn't save me, Asra."

Asra looked confused.

"It's true that my spear training and martial arts saved my life many times. I'm proud of myself for what I've been able to achieve, but..." Balsa didn't know the right words to use to express what she wanted. "Killing people I hated didn't fix anything. I didn't feel any better after killing them."

Balsa rested the shaft of her spear against her forehead. "Before I even realized it, I'd changed in ways I could never recover from. The hatred changed me."

Balsa's eyes focused on Asra. "Even if no one else knows how much you want to kill people, *you'll* know. You'll always know. I want you to imagine my face when I killed people over and over again, simply because I hated them and wanted them dead. Imagine the split-second feeling of relief I felt cutting them down before the hatred consumed me again."

A shiver went up Asra's spine. Her shoulders stiffened. She looked down at the floor and said, "But I don't think having the god answer my prayers is like that," she said quietly. She seemed to be trying to convince herself.

Balsa shook her head in denial. "I don't know if what's inside you is a god or not--and I know a little about things like gods and spirits. When I was young, my father told me about Yoram, the god of thunder in Kanbal. I never met him, but he's the first god I ever heard of. As for spirits--well, there was a water spirit that caused clouds and rain that I spent some time with. Another spirit I encountered had power over dreams. There's a spirit in Kanbal called the Mountain King that changes thoughts and memories into a precious gemstone called luisha. He looked a lot like a snake to me.

"But, Asra," she said, "I have *never* seen a god that saves or punishes people before. Not once."

Asra's eyes opened wide. She didn't see any trace of blame or reproach in Balsa's eyes, only a profound sadness.

"Think about it, Asra. If there really was a god that punished all the bad people and saved all the good ones, there would probably be a lot less suffering in the world."

Asra's ears buzzed. Her face was so hot she felt like she was on fire. Balsa was making her realize things about herself that she wasn't ready to understand. It was possible that her belief in Talhamaya was wrong. When she reviewed everything her mother had told her about the god in light of what Balsa had just said, a lot of it seemed strange and not easy to verify.

Asra ignored the ringing in her ears and doubled down on what her mother had told her. Her mother wouldn't lie. "Talhamaya is a great and powerful god! I think she really does pass judgment on bad people. Sada Talhamaya united with the god and used her power to punish all the evil people! That's what my mom told me!" Asra insisted vehemently. "The Tal Kumada never told us the truth. Only our mom did. She told me about the kind of person Sada Talhamaya was. She made Rotarbal a peaceful place without hunger or suffering. Everything that's wrong with the world now is because Kiran killed her."

Balsa regarded Asra in silence for a moment. "Do you intend to become Sada Talhamaya?" she asked.

Asra froze still and held her breath.

You're going to change the world, Asra! You've been chosen, chosen by the god! You'll become Sada Talhamaya, transcend ordinary human existence, and bring peace to our world. Asra remembered her mother saying those words to her.

Mom prayed for me to be chosen by the god, and I was.

Asra tried to rekindle the feelings of exhilaration and complete safety and peace she'd felt while killing the wolves. She'd felt like she'd been floating above the clouds then.

But as she sat here on her bed in this tiny room, she felt no desire to become Sada Talhamaya at all. She didn't think that she could be the a

huge and powerful god that removed all the suffering from the world. That wasn't who she was, or who she wanted to be.

Why did the god choose me? I wish she'd chosen someone stronger and smarter.

Asra frowned. "I... I..." she whispered. Tears filled her eyes.

"What should I do, Balsa? My mom wanted me to be Sada Talhamaya so that I could bring peace and happiness to the world. She gave her life so that I could do that, but I... I don't think I can." Tears coursed steadily down her face.

"I don't really understand Tal religious beliefs or gods," Balsa said, "so I don't understand Talhamaya, either. But I don't think you'd be happy living as god who kills people whenever she likes. I also don't think that a god like that could bring peace and happiness to the world."

She looked Asra directly in the eyes. "So let's make sure that doesn't happen. Your face during the wolf attack almost scared me to death."

Asra felt ice-cold hands wrap around her heart and squeeze. Her eyes snapped open wide.

"When you wore clothes the color of sarayu flowers after your bath in Shirogai, you were beautiful. It made me happy to see you that way."

Asra remembered that the dress smelled like flowers. She tightened her grip on herself and pushed aside the memory. She shouldn't listen to Balsa. Balsa wasn't Tal or Rotan. She was from Kanbal and didn't know anything at all about Talhamaya. Asra had to believe in the Talhamaya; Talhamaya wouldn't forgive her if she didn't.

Asra closed her eyes tight and thought*, Like the surface of a lake in winter.*

Balsa watched Asra's face go blank and expressionless. She couldn't think of anything else to say that might reach her.

Chapter 4 - Falling into a Trap

Early morning light was just peeking over the horizon as Balsa and Asra joined a large group of people gathered outside the main gate of the Trader's Market. The wind was bitterly cold. Horses stomped their numb feet as the baggage inspectors passed among them, their breath steaming in the frigid air.

Balsa and Asra waited with the Tal people at the very end of a long line of caravans preparing for departure. They each wore a full set of black Tal clothes and shuma that covered the entirety of their faces except their eyes. Balsa rubbed the neck of a horse standing next to her to warm up her numb hands. She carried her spear in the same style that the other Tal people carried their weapons: it was fastened securely to the horse's saddle.

Asra didn't say a word as she watched the sun come up. A seemingly endless line of caravans stretched out over the snowy flatlands ahead of them. A bell rang from above the gate to signal that it would soon open. Asra was so startled by the bell that she crouched down and tried to hide. The Tal people around them finished packing and mounted their horses. They were ready to leave.

The leader of the very first caravan in line took a deep breath and sounded a long note on his hunting horn. He passed through the open gate, leading all of his people behind him.

Asra saw the inn Mina was staying at as she and Balsa got closer to the gate. She hadn't gotten to say goodbye to Mina in person, but she said it now in her heart.

Most of the road was hard and slippery with ice, but there were muddy, slushy patches as well. It was slow going for all of the caravans leaving the Trader's Market. People traveled together in small groups at first, but as time passed everyone stretched out in a single long line to make more room for the wagons and carts on the road.

Around noon, Balsa caught sight of a line of low hills in the distance. The road cut deep into a forest thick with pine trees. When Balsa could see Shahal mine shaft ahead of her in the distance, Ianu brought her horse up alongside hers and whispered, “We’ll be leaving the road soon. Please slow down so that we can pull away from the others without being noticed.”

Balsa nodded and pulled up a little on her reins.

The Tal people slowly fell behind the line of other caravans and turned onto a narrow forest path that quickly vanished into the trees. The other caravans didn’t seem to notice when they broke off and turned aside.

“Asra, ride behind me,” Ianu said. “Balsa, please protect the rear of our caravan. I want to be sure that no one’s following us,” she said.

Balsa nodded and freed her spear from her saddle with her right hand. She kept the reins in her left hand as she turned her horse toward the back of the line of Tal people. A thin line of stinging pain moved up her injured side and hand as she maneuvered the horse.

There was only a little snow on the forest path. The trees served as a buffer against the wind, so this was the warmest part of their journey so far. A fresh pine scent wafted through green trees untouched by winter snow. The forest was completely silent: Balsa heard no songbirds or animals moving, nor did she hear any of the Tal people say a single word to one another. They moved through the woods as silently as shadows.

Snow started falling, but only a little of it broke through the canopy of the trees above to reach the ground. The path got steeper and rougher as it wound through low hills. The trees thinned and gave way to a rocky area; boulders lined the path to either side. The horses cleverly found footing on the steep path.

Balsa heard water flowing from somewhere ahead. It was probably a mountain river whose source was nearby. Suddenly, the hair on the back of her neck prickled. She couldn’t hear or sense anything out of the ordinary, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was

something very dangerous nearby. When she searched for the cause of her unease, Ianu called out to her and interrupted her concentration.

"We're almost to the Sai river!" she shouted. "After we cross the bridge, we'll be in the Shan forest. No Rotan ever sets foot there, so we'll be safe. We'll stop for rest as soon as we cross the river!"

Balsa waved her spear to indicate her understanding, but she frowned. Ianu didn't need to shout for Balsa to hear her.

The forest receded as they got closer to the Sai river gorge. There was a suspension bridge over the river as Ianu had said, but it wasn't wide and it didn't look strong enough to support anything much heavier than a mountain goat.

The Tal trappers and merchants visibly relaxed when they saw the bridge. They were almost home. Ianu kept turning around and looking at Balsa. "We're almost there," she said. "We just need to cross."

Balsa didn't answer her. A chill went up her spine. She felt an unmistakable air of intimidation and threat from somewhere--somewhere close. Someone was lying in wait, preparing to attack. She was sure of it.

Balsa urged her horse into a gallop and prodded the flank of Asra's horse with the butt of her spear. "Asra, run! It's a trap!"

Balsa felt an arrow in her back before she finished speaking. She twisted and yanked it out, then pulled frantically on her horse's reins to turn around. A large group of armed men moved silently out of the trees behind the Tal trappers.

Asra let out a high-pitched scream.

"Run! We have to cross the bridge!" Ianu called out as she kicked her horse into a gallop. The Tal people formed a line and crossed the bridge as quickly as possible. Some glanced back at their attackers with expressions of alarm. Asra's horse ran to the front of the line and crossed the bridge. Ianu was right behind her.

As soon as Balsa saw that Asra was safely across, she brandished her spear and pantomimed cutting the rope that attached the bridge to this

side. The attackers fanned out around her in a semicircle. She wondered why they weren't using their bows anymore.

Balsa put her back to the bridge. She didn't expect to be attacked from that direction, but the people on the other side were still in danger. If all of the archers she could see fired at once, Balsa wouldn't be able to defend against them all. They could easily kill Asra and the others from this range--so why weren't they firing?

It was almost like they'd sprung their trap to force Asra and the others across the bridge. They gradually came closer to Balsa. When she turned slightly and saw Asra being carried farther into the trees on the same horse as Ianu, she smiled in relief.

The men surrounding her made no move to give chase. Asra wasn't their target; Balsa was--they'd been waiting here for her from the start. This was a deliberate ambush that Ianu had set for her. She had separated Balsa and Asra so that only Balsa would be killed here. When Balsa realized this, her entire body burned with rage at both Ianu and herself.

When Asra was completely out of sight of the bridge, all the men attacked Balsa at once. Balsa stood no chance against the entire group, so she stood up on her horse's back, kicked at her saddle and jumped over the heads of the men surrounding her. She landed in the woods on the other side of them on all four limbs like a cat. The instant she landed, she broke into a run.

The men yelled out to one another to give chase, but the thick underbrush beneath the trees and the steep slope that rose from the Sai river's gorge made running slow.

Balsa put her back to a tree and kicked at its roots for increased momentum as she leaped at her nearest foe in a forward flip.

He had no time to block her with his sword or get out of the way. Balsa's first strike sent him head-first into the ground. She stepped on his head as she jumped up and side-stepped another attacker, cutting open his arm with her spear as she passed him by.

Balsa had no time to think. The all-consuming rage boiling within her required an outlet. She moved on pure instinct as she kept fighting.

The trees were her only allies here. They made it harder for her attackers to see where she was, which meant they couldn't surround her as easily or use their bows. Balsa flitted from tree to tree and fell upon her enemies one by one--and one by one, they fell.

But there were too many enemies. Balsa kept running and fighting in her heavy coat until her lungs burned and her vision went blurry from sweat and fatigue. Snow started falling in sheets; she kicked it up as she ran.

As Balsa blocked the incoming swipe of a longsword with her spear, she felt someone cut her back open from shoulder to hip in a diagonal line. Her coat, hood, and shuma face covering all served to protect her back somewhat, so the wound was shallow. Balsa twisted and felled the man behind her with a single hit, then tripped the man in front of her. By the time she knocked out the second man, Balsa knew that she wouldn't be able to keep going for much longer.

Balsa ran. Her breath was a white trail that made it difficult for her to see anything in front of her. She summoned the supernatural strength often seen in wounded animals and ran through the forest at incredible speed.

She ran all the way back to the bridge and collapsed. The wound in her left side reopened and bled through her clothes. Balsa groaned and crawled the scant remaining distance to the bridge before cutting the rope that attached the bridge to this side. When she heard the rope snap, she caught both ends of it in her hands so that the bridge wouldn't immediately collapse into the gorge below.

She heard men behind her; they were still chasing her. When someone tried to attack her from behind, she shot her leg out and

tripped them; a man pitched past her and fell directly into the ice-cold river below.

Balsa suddenly lost all strength in her legs. She felt herself start to fall forward. Thinking quickly, she threaded the shaft of her spear into the space between two bridge planks just before the bridge fell completely away from the cliff. She slammed into the other side of the gorge along with the broken bridge.

Balsa's entire body went limp from shock and pain. Her right hand lost its grip on her spear, leaving her hanging by a single arm. Arrows whizzed around her and bounced off the rock cliff was pressed against. She couldn't move.

Hanging in midair with snow falling all around her, Balsa looked down at the blue-green depths of the half-frozen river. She scrunched her shoulders and brought her knees up to make herself as small a target as possible, then pushed off the edge of the cliff with both feet. She freed her spear from the broken bridge and plunged into the river below.

Balsa closed her eyes as she fell. Scant seconds later, she felt a shock like being slammed in the head with a thick wooden board and passed into a world of darkness.

Balsa's attackers watched Balsa fall into the river; a few moments later, she floated to the surface and drifted slowly away from them like a broken twig caught in a sluggish current. She remained face-down and did not move.

The men put aside their weapons and looked up at the gray sky. The snowstorm was getting worse.

"Should we take her head?" one of the men asked.

The others shook their heads. "Are you kidding?" another man asked. "The blizzard's coming on, and we're hurt. We need to return to the settlement now or we'll all be stranded out here. Unless you like the idea of freezing to death…"

The men looked down at Balsa's body one more time, then gathered up their fallen allies and returned to their homes.

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Asra watched Balsa leap over the line of attackers and dash into the woods, but she couldn't see anything else after that. Ianu seized the reins of her horse and climbed up in the saddle behind her, then ordered her horse to gallop.

"No! We have to save Balsa!" Asra cried out. She turned in the saddle to try to catch sight of Balsa again.

"That's impossible," Ianu said. "We're not warriors, Asra. We can't win against such a large number of bandits. You have to get away. Please don't waste Balsa's sacrifice!"

Tears overflowed in Asra's eyes. She gritted her teeth. Ianu was speaking as carefully and politely as she could to soften the blow of Balsa's loss, but Asra didn't notice. She was so worried for Balsa that she went a little crazy and shouted without thinking: "Ianu, I can call Talhamaya! I can defeat all those bandits and save Balsa!"

Ianu and the other Tal traders surrounded Asra so that she couldn't turn the horse around and return to the river. No one listened to her or helped her no matter how much she screamed. Her journey after that felt like a never-ending nightmare.

Ianu and the others guarded Asra closely as they ran deeper and deeper into the woods. Snow fell and swirled around them, making it difficult to see very far ahead. They rode through forest groves and dismounted to lead their horses up steep paths, continuously hurrying forward.

When Ianu and the others finally stopped moving, the poor horses were so exhausted that a line of grass-green foam surrounded all of their mouths. The sun was about to set, so the world was gloomy and half-dark. Snow was still falling, but Asra felt unusually warm. She saw light flickering in front of her and blinked.

When she opened her eyes, she gasped.

The light she was seeing came from Talhamaya's sacred river. She and the Tal trappers were traveling along the line of a thin tributary of that river. The glow was much fainter here than what she'd seen at the temple of Talhamaya with her mother, but Asra had no doubt that this river flowed from and was connected to the larger one.

Monkeys chattered together in the trees above her head. The trees and the rocks all seemed bigger here than in the regular forest; they were all covered in a thick layer of blue moss. Directly in front of Asra was a highly polished megalith of black stone. Asra suddenly knew where she was.

This is a temple. It looked a lot like the temple of Talhamaya where she and her mother had visited Sada Talhamaya's grave, but this one was smaller.

People in black robes emerged from the shadows and enclosed Asra in a tight circle. One of them was a young, slight woman with a monkey sitting on her shoulder. She came very close to Asra, then stopped. She took the bit of Asra's horse in one hand and removed her hood with the other. When Asra saw her face, she gasped.

"Shihana?"

Shihana studied Asra's face as if she were searching for something specific in it. When she discerned nothing but surprise in Asra's expression, she smiled.

"I'm so glad you weren't hurt, Asra. It must have been so frightening! But everything's going to be all right now."

Asra had no idea what Shihana was talking about or why she was here. She kept staring at her in shock.

The monkey leaped from Shihana's shoulder to Asra's with a happy-sounding chuckling noise. Asra instinctively clutched at the monkey's soft, warm fur. He brushed his furry face against her cheek.

Asra felt her awareness shrinking so that it included only the monkey and Shihana.

"Monkeys are the messengers of the god," Shihana said. "I understand what monkeys say, so I'm her messenger, too."

Asra remembered Shihana telling her something like that before. She'd first met her a long time ago when Shihana came to visit her mother. Asra had never seen her mother as terrified as she'd been of Shihana, at least at first. But then the two of them had started talking. It took several visits, but Shihana and her mother eventually became friends.

Asra's mother had ordered her harshly to never tell anyone about Shihana, not even her father or Chikisa, but she'd never told Asra why.

Once in a great while, Shihana would appear outside their settlement like the wind. She'd always leave as quickly and silently as she'd come. Asra considered her very mysterious.

Although Balsa had spoken to her about Sufar, Asra didn't know that Shihana was Sufar's daughter. She also didn't remember Shihana carrying her out of the inn in New Yogo or Shihana's fight with Balsa; she'd been drugged and asleep at the time. Asra did think it strange that Shihana would be here waiting for her, though--too strange to be just a coincidence.

"This is sacred ground," Sihana said. "The forest around this temple is very cold, but the place where we're standing is warm, isn't it?"

"That's because the sacred river is flowing again," Asra muttered.

Shihana's eyes shone. "Can you see it, Asra? Can you see the river flowing along that line of blue moss?" she asked.

Asra nodded. If Shihana truly was the messenger of the god, she should be able to see the river, too, but it seemed like she couldn't. Maybe the tributary of the river that connected to this temple was so thin and shallow that other people couldn't see it easily?

Shihana grasped Asra's hands reverently and helped her dismount. "Blessed child, you are most welcome here. You are the Chamau. One day, you will become Sada Talhamaya." Shihana's voice was not much louder than a whisper.

Asra felt frozen to the spot.

"Don't worry, Asra. I know everything. Your mother and I talked about everything you are, and everything you will become."

Asra looked at Shihana fearfully. Her expression was sly and crafty like a fox's. Asra had known Shihana since she was very young, but she really knew nothing about her except for her name--and that she was dangerous.

She knew exactly where Asra would be and the exact time she would be there. Did she have the power to predict the future? Even if she didn't, she seemed to have the power of seeing through people to discover their secrets. Asra suddenly felt very afraid of Shihana.

"If you really know everything," Asra said, "do you know about Balsa?"

Shihana nodded. Her expression betrayed nothing.

"Shihana, please save Balsa! We were attacked by bandits at the bridge. There were so many of them, but I'm sure that Balsa's still alive. She must have lived through the attack somehow. She's probably hurt and waiting for us to help her. Please! Shihana, we have to go back there, or at least send someone..."

Shihana pulled gently on Asra's arm and started walking. "Of course. I heard about the attack from the monkeys in the trees. I already sent people to help her."

Asra looked at the monkey perched on her own shoulder with surprise. When she looked into its eyes, she saw the same intelligence and self-awareness that people had. This monkey was no ordinary animal. Maybe Shihana really could talk to monkeys. Asra had seen monkeys in the trees overhead as she and the others had fled from the bandits; the monkeys must have seen everything.

Someone was standing on the narrow path ahead, carrying a torch. When they saw Shihana and Asra approach, they held their torch higher and started leading them deeper into the forest. Asra focused completely on following the light of the torch. The surrounding darkness seemed indistinct and unreal; she felt like she was walking in a dream.

"Shihana, do you really know everything?"

Shihana smiled a little. "Well, maybe not *everything.* But I know a lot. What do you want to ask about?"

“Do you know where my brother is?” Asra whispered. “Is he safe?”

Shihana’s smile deepened. “Yes, I do, and he’s perfectly safe. You’ll be able to see him soon.”

Asra hadn’t expected that answer at all. “Did you save him?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you everything that happened, I promise. But first, we should get inside and have something to eat.”

Dozens of tiny points of light rose out of the darkness ahead of Asra. The wind carried the strong smell of smoke. Were people trying to ward off the wolves here? As Asra got closer to the lights, she saw that they’d been lit inside iron baskets and set close together in a circle of fire. Warriors stood near the fires; Asra could see the shadows of their weapons in the dim light of the flames.

The warriors bowed their heads to Shihana and Asra as they passed. They all seemed a bit nervous and afraid, which put Asra even more on edge.

In the very center of the ring of fire, there were a few small houses with sloped roofs that were completely covered in snow. These were the homes of the Ramau, Tal people that served as apprentices to the Tal Kumada. Shihana invited Asra inside one of these houses.

The house was larger on the the inside than it had seemed from the outside, but there were no signs of habitation within. The room was entirely bare of decoration or personal belongings. The floor was made of polished stone. Sweet-smelling rushes had recently been scattered across it. The room’s only fireplace had just been lit.

On a large table near the fire, Asra saw a huge loaf of bam bread with butter and honey, along with a tureen of soup that was steaming hot. There were also pickled fruits that looked like strawberries and a large pot of milk tea.

Asra didn’t forget for a moment how worried she was about Balsa, but the sight of the food a made her remember that she hadn’t eaten anything that morning. Her stomach growled audibly.

Shihana removed her heavy Tal-style cloak and hood, then pulled out a chair for Asra at the table.

“We should eat,” she said kindly. “It’s easier to think calmly after you’re warm and full.” She poured Asra a cup of milk tea and passed her butter and honey to layer on slices of bam bread. Asra felt warmth spreading through her chilled limbs as she ate. Her worry for Balsa was like a block of ice inside her. Eating didn’t thaw that block of ice, but it did melt it a little around the edges.

Shihana’s monkey stuffed his face happily with pickled strawberries. Shihana appeared completely content as she watched Asra and the monkey eat. Just as Asra finished her meal, there was a knock on the door. Shihana rose from the table and cracked open the door the tiniest bit so that she could speak to someone outside. She exchanged only a few words with them before shutting the door again.

When Shihana sat down at the table again, her expression was grim.

“What’s wrong?” Asra asked.

“I have sad news. Balsa...it seems that Balsa is dead.”

Time stopped for Asra. Her mind went completely blank as she struggled to comprehend what Shihana had just said. The news hit her in waves, passing through her at a surface level before cutting her straight to the heart. When she finally understood that Balsa wouldn’t be coming back, she started crying.

Tears fell silently down Asra’s cheeks. She didn’t sob or cry out; she sat up straight and wept in complete silence.

Shihana wrapped her arm around Asra’s shoulders.

“It was my fault,” Asra choked out. “If she hadn’t met me, she’d...she’d...” She tried to take a deep breath, but stuttering gasps were all she could manage. She ground her teeth and shut her eyes tight to suppress the grief that threatened to tear her heart out.

Shihana rubbed her back to soothe her. “It wasn’t your fault. You made sure someone went to try to save her. Balsa put herself in harm’s way to save you because that was her choice.” There was a strange undertone in Shihana’s voice that Asra couldn’t quite identify. Her voice kept getting softer, like it was coming from far away. She tried to lean closer

so that she could listen better, but her entire body felt sluggish. She couldn't move.

Asra didn't know it, but her food had been drugged. She fell into a deep sleep with tears still falling down her face.

Chapter 5 - Reverence to the God

Asra awoke when the wagon she was riding in jolted against a large stone in the middle of the road. For a second she thought she was riding in Mr. Naka's cart again, but when she opened her eyes and looked around, she knew right away that she was somewhere else. The cart was almost completely empty. There was a small window that revealed people walking outside the wagon.

"Are you awake?" Shihana asked from outside. She called out to someone else, but stayed near the wagon's window. The wagon slowed down suddenly and stopped. A door at the back of the wagon opened, revealing Ianu carrying a basket. Seeing Ianu made Asra remember what had happened to Balsa. She stared at the floor as she washed her face and drank some of the water Ianu had brought, but she could not be persuaded to eat anything. A bitter aftertaste lingered in her mouth from her last meal, so she knew that her food had been drugged. They had drugged her and placed her in this cart as she slept. What were they planning to do with her?

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Jitan," Ianu said. "Rota's Ritual Hall and Prince Ihan's castle are there."

She said nothing else. Her casual tone and brief reply made Asra irritable.

They drugged me and put me in this wagon without my consent. Too many people have treated me like this. Like a pawn in a game.

"Why did you put me to sleep?" she asked. She felt vaguely nauseated.

"I'm sorry about that," Shihana said through the window. "I only did it because we're short on time."

Asra's eyebrows furrowed together. "Why are we in such a hurry?" Her rage at being treated as Shihana's plaything flared up as

she spoke. “What’s going on? Why are we going to Jitan? Why don’t we have more time? What are you going to do with me?!”

She was choked by sudden tears and couldn’t say anything else. Why did people keep chasing her? Why was Shihana taking her to Jitan? She didn’t understand anything that was happening at all, and no one was explaining anything to her. They were intolerably cruel.

Everyone’s treating me like a baby!

As her anger roiled inside her, the silver ring around her neck began to glow. Her body overflowed with power like storm clouds swelling up with water before a storm. Her eyes shone with angry tears as she yelled, “Stop ignoring me, and stop treating me like a baby! I can call down the god whenever I want, and she’ll kill you all if I say so!”

Ianu went deathly pale and stepped away from her. All trace of the meek and mild-mannered little girl that Asra appeared to be was gone. Her eyes flashed with the predatory gleam of a rabid wolf’s.

“Calm down, Asra,” Shihana said. “We don’t think you’re a baby, and we don’t mean to treat you like one. You went through a terrible ordeal yesterday, so I thought you might find it difficult to sleep. That’s why I added a little bit of sleeping medicine to your dinner. And I’ll explain why we’re heading to Jitan as soon as I can--all right?”

Asra said nothing. She glared at Shihana like she was trying to cut through her with her eyes. Shihana remained completely calm as she said, “I just said that I’ll explain, so please calm yourself and listen.”

Shihana sounded sincere. The rage building up within Asra lessened a bit, but she wasn’t ready to let it go. At her slight nod, Shihana began to speak.

Shihana told Asra that she was descended from the Sul Kashal, the hunting dogs of Sada Talhamaya in ancient Rotarbal, and that she currently served as the eyes and ears of the royal family of Rota. In that capacity, she’d gotten deeply involved with the Tal people, especially the Ramau.

“Isn’t that right, Ianu?” Shihana asked as she shifted to face the Tal woman.

Ianu's face was still pale with fear and dread, but she nodded. "Yes. The night before last, I told you a little about the Kashal. It's their duty to watch us so that no Tal person will ever be able to reclaim Sada Talhamaya's power."

"But," Shihana cut in, "interacting with the Tal people made me change my mind about what my duty actually was. I detest the utter subjugation that the Tal people are forced to live under in modern Rota, all because of crimes their ancestors committed a very long time ago. It isn't fair, and I think it's wrong."

Asra remembered all the times Shihana had sat and played with her when she was little. She knew that Shihana didn't hate the Tal people.

"But my father leads the Kashal, and he's stubbornly loyal to Rota's royal family. I couldn't share my feelings or my plans with him. But fate works in mysterious ways. A way forward for the Tal people appeared without me even having to look for it."

Shihana told Asra that Prince Ihan had fallen in love with a Tal woman when Shihana was still a teenager. "Prince Ihan is a good man, and an honest one, so of course he wanted to marry her. I was only sixteen at the time, but I remember clearly how serious he was about the marriage. He really loved her. The Kashal would watch over them when they met so that they wouldn't be discovered by others."

Shihana sounded like she was talking about a friend. Asra became completely absorbed in her story.

"But Prince Ihan wasn't allowed to marry her. Marrying a Tal woman would have cost him the trust and support of every clan lord in Rota.

"The woman he loved was clever, so she guessed that this would be the case. So when he asked her to marry him, she made herself disappear so that he wouldn't lose everything. She fled from her home and her family to live among strangers. That woman was your mother, Asra."

Asra stared at Shihana in shock. She knew that her mother had been forced to flee to the sacred forest before she was born, but she never knew why until now. She never would have guessed that her mother

had fallen in love with Rota's Crown Prince. Asra was still too young to understand all her reasons for fleeing, but she remembered how terrified her mother had been of coming into contact with any Rotans and how sad and embittered she'd become over the years.

"Prince Ihan went mad and searched everywhere for her. He ordered the Kashal to find her. I had to look for many years, but eventually I found her. Do you remember that day? We met for the first time on the day that I discovered where your mother was hiding."

Asra nodded.

"When I saw her playing with you, I knew that she was happy. She begged me not to tell Prince Ihan where she was, so I never did. I didn't think things would work out well if they saw each other again."

Shihana told Asra how Prince Ihan worked to protect the Tal people and improve their lives, even though he was a member of Rota's royal family. "But the southern clan lords are greedy and mean-spirited. When they found out that Prince Ihan had fallen in love with a Tal woman, they spread rumors to erode his influence and blacken his reputation. They've always hated him because he's introduced reforms that would increase their taxes and infringe on their rights. I even overheard some of them conspiring to assassinate him."

Shihana's eyes shone with a hidden light that revealed a secret source of strength within her. "The southern clan lords are incredibly wealthy. They use their power to increase their economic influence and consolidate their resources. I expect them to revolt against the north at any time. King Yosam is a good king and is well-respected by everyone, but his health is deteriorating. Prince Ihan will become King of Rota when he dies, but I don't believe the southern clan lords will obey him. Even if they did choose to cooperate for a while, they'd probably work to make the lives of the Tal people worse so that Prince Ihan would suffer."

Asra knew nothing of Rota's politics or its rulers, so what Shihana was telling her was entirely new. She understood why the Tal people

and the Rotans were treated differently now. She listened closely to Shihana in case she revealed anything else of similar importance.

“Prince Ihan wants to find a way for everyone to live in peace--Rotans, Tal people, Kashal, and even the southern clan lords. But I often wonder if that’s possible. I worry about it all the time.”

Shihana suddenly brought her face close to Asra’s and whispered, “But Asra, I’ve seen miracles. First, there were signs of a coming change. Three years, ago, the pikuya moss that grows along the sacred river from Noyuk blossomed with tiny yellow flowers. No one’s ever seen that before.”

Asra nodded. She’d heard rumors about the flowers growing, too, though she hadn’t seen them.

“Nothing else happened for half a year after that, so the rumors eventually died down--but the winter before last, wauru flowers bloomed in summer and didn’t wither until the snows came. Wauru usually bloom for a very short time, so the news spread quickly among the Tal people. The Kashal heard of this as well.”

Asra remembered hearing about the warau flowers, too.

“Do you understand what these signs were, Asra? They were telling us that the sacred river would soon flow into our world from Noyuk again. When I consulted with the Tal Kumada about this possibility, they expressed both joy and fear. Joy because the river brings riches and blessings from the world of the gods, and fear because the river also contains Talhamaya. I knew that the Kashal would have to be especially vigilant in the years to come. But my father...” She paused. “Well, he never saw things the same way I did.”

Shihana’s eyes locked on Asra. “The Rotan people have been in power for a long time, but they’ve forgotten how they came into their power in the first place. The more I saw of how Tal people lived, the more uncomfortable I got with the way things are. There’s no evidence that any of the ancient legends about Sada Talhamaya are true. The Tal Kumada all tell the same tale, but they have no proof. Who’s to say the Rotans didn’t twist historical facts to suit their purposes?”

Shihana waited. She looked like she was expecting Asra to agree with her. Shihana lifted her eyebrows and said, “Talhamaya has a lot of power. If someone evil managed to get that power, they would definitely be terrifying. But think about it, Asra. If someone with a pure heart were given Sada Talhamaya’s power, they could use it to create a happier and more peaceful world.”

Asra nodded reflexively.

Shihana smiled happily at her. “I was sure you’d see it the same way. If a person that didn’t want to harm anyone had Sada Talhamaya’s power, they could use it to help everyone, not just the Tal people. Maybe the Rotans would even thank the Tal people if such a thing came to pass. The Tal people wouldn’t have to hide in the shadows anymore. Rota would take its first steps to being a truly free and equal kingdom.”

Shihana was so zealous that she looked feverish. “I shared this dream with your mother, Ianu and the other Ramau. Isn’t that right, Ianu?”

Ianu brought her chin to her chest. “Shihana and the Kashal are our guards and overseers, but when we heard such words from her, we thought that the gods must be speaking through her. Until that time, I felt like I’d been pinned to the ground by unforgiving hands and that I would never be allowed to rise, but the dream of a free and fair Rota released me from all my feelings of fear and oppression. I am tired of living in the shadows. I wish to live in the light. I want to believe that the legends we tell of Sada Talhamaya are untrue and that her power can be used to make Rota a wonderful place to live for all its people.”

Ianu’s eyes shone with hope. “If Sada Talhamaya truly was a kind person before she united with the god, I can’t believe that the god would make her evil or cruel. If Sada Talhamaya walked among us again, I’m sure she would find a way to let us live without fear or prejudice. That’s why I stopped being afraid of the signs we saw before the sacred river began flowing again. I think that now is the perfect time for Sada Talhamaya to return to us.”

Ianu smiled at Shihana, then looked down at Asra. Her entire demeanor changed in an instant: she looked like a worshipper deep in prayer at a temple. “And then, when the sacred river did flow into our world, the god chose you, Asra! She chose someone with a pure heart and no hatred for others, just as I hoped for. If that’s not a miracle, what is?”

A chill went up Asra’s spine.

“Asra, this is your destiny,” Shihana said. “You have the power to save us all from darkness and destruction. We’re not afraid of you. All of our hopes are resting on you.” Shihana spoke as if she were in a trance.

Ianu sank to the floor and rested her forehead against the ground to pay reverence to Talhamaya. When Asra remembered the awed and fearful expressions she’d seen on the faces of the people she’d passed by in the wagon, her skin went tingly and numb, but it wasn’t an entirely unpleasant feeling.

Asra...

Asra suddenly heard her mother’s voice and felt her arms around her.

You're going to change the world, Asra! You've been chosen, chosen by the god! You'll become Sada Talhamaya, transcend ordinary human existence, and bring peace to our world. We don't need to be afraid of anything anymore.

Asra's chest swelled with pride. She wanted to be worthy of Talhamaya. But at the same time, her legs felt like rubber. She hadn't been able to save her mother, even with Talhamaya's power.

I wouldn't be scared of anything if only she was here.

"You've been blessed by the god, so I think I have to confess something to you, Asra." Shihana spoke softly. "Once, not very long ago, I thought that I would have to kill you. I even tried to once."

Asra started shaking all over.

“When your mother told us that the sacred river was flowing again, we weren’t sure whether or not to believe her,” Shihana said. “No one can see the river except the Ramau and the Tal Kumada. I didn’t think you were capable of seeing it yet, Asra, because you’re so young. That’s why I didn’t stop my father when he handed your mother over for execution.”

Asra’s heart beat faster. She took shallow, panting breaths and curled in on herself.

“It’s the truth,” Shihana said. “I hated her for what she’d done. She was reckless and foolish to do something so dangerous without telling anyone first. She had to know she’d be caught. And if news reached the Rotans that the Tal people were trying to restore their ancient god, they might strike out against the Tal people and kill them.” Shihana spoke without stopping for breath; she seemed determined to reach the end of her confession as quickly as possible.

“But when I saw what happened at Shintadan, I finally understood her. It was like being hit by a bolt of lightning. I knew then that Torisha had discovered a way to bring Talhamaya into our world. You’re the very first person to realize that the sacred river was flowing again, Asra. The Tal Kumada and the Ramau should have known you were the Chamau just from that. I should have figured it out myself. My willful ignorance and stupidity got your mother killed. I’m sorry.”

Tears formed in the corners of Shihana’s sharp, clear eyes. Asra was deeply moved.

“My father saw the whole thing through the eyes of a dog at Shintadan. When I learned what had happened, I knew that I had to find a way to save you.”

Asra’s throat felt rough and raw like it had been sandpapered over. She couldn’t move.

“My father clings stubbornly to the ancient laws and pacts that bound the Sul Kashal.When he realized that you possessed Talhamaya’s

power, he chased after you. I went with him, of course. I wanted to protect you and find some way to save you if he tried to kill you."

Asra found it strange that Shihana seemed to have some of the same motivations as Balsa. She hadn't expected that at all.

"We finally tracked you down at that inn on New Yogo's border. But Balsa realized that my father wanted to kill you, too, so she took you and fled." Shihana closed her mouth sharply. Asra heard nothing but the sound of the wagon wheels scraping over ice and snow outside.

Shihana sighed and shook her head. "I know that Balsa had good intentions, and she probably saved you many times, but I was honestly worried that I would never see you again." Shihana faced Asra squarely. "We explained the whole situation to Tanda. Eventually, he told us where to find you and Balsa in Shirogai. We didn't want to rush in blindly, though--you know how smart Balsa was. I expected her to set a trap for us, so I sent a letter telling you both to go to Jitan. Then I mobilized all of the Kashal's resources and spies that I could and assigned them to the roads between Shirogai and Jitan."

Oh! So that's why Tajiru told Balsa about the clan lord's son looking for her, Asra thought. *He must have been working with the Kashal.*

Asra had no idea that most of what Shihana had just told her was a lie.

"Was Ianu a spy, too?" Asra asked.

Shihana nodded. "I asked her to keep you safe no matter what and to bring you to me as soon as possible. I ran the risk of losing you two in the mountains, but fortunately that didn't happen. Balsa gave up her life to save you."

Asra still couldn't believe that Balsa was dead. Shihana seemed to sense that her death disturbed Asra. "It must have been so awful, Asra. But you're here now, with me. It's safe now." She sounded awed and grateful.

Shihana sat seiza in front of Asra and slowly brought her forehead to the floor. She kept her face down in reverence to the god as she said, "You've been so blessed, Asra. You've been chosen by a powerful god.

Please protect us and fight with us so that the Tal people may live in the light once more."

Asra felt like her entire body had been encased in ice.

"I don't ask this only for myself, Asra. I believe your mother would have asked this same thing if she had lived."

Asra shook from head to toe as she stood above the prostrate Shihana and Ianu. They were both on the floor with their faces down to pay respect to the god--and to her. They wanted her to become Sada Talhamaya to save her people. How could she refuse?

Part 3: Sada Talhamaya

Chapter 1 - Premonition of Disaster

Sufar guided Tanda across the Rotan countryside on horseback, using all his wiles and tricks to make sure that Kashal loyal to Shihana couldn't pick up their trail. They came across ordinary travelers occasionally, but more often than not they passed through pathless forests or little-traveled river valleys where there were no people at all. One extremely narrow path took them behind a huge waterfall.

Other Kashal knew and used many of the same secret paths as Sufar. As a result, an infrastructure had been built up along the more commonly shared Kashal routes: there were inns, campgrounds and places to resupply all along their route.

Tanda's breath turned to white steam as he stared up at the leaden sky. It looked like it was going to snow again. It had been a few days since Sufar's rescue; he wasn't sure how many. They were heading to Jitan, so Sufar would find a safe place for them to stay and then scout ahead, searching for their next place to rest and gathering news. Thanks to Sufar's scouting, they managed to avoid Shihana and the Kashal who supported her.

Sufar also managed to meet with his own allies and learn about Shihana's movements and plans. Receiving news from the rest of Rota seemed to provide an endless source of energy to Sufar; Tanda was hard-pressed to keep up with him sometimes.

Sufar was viewed as the representative of the Kashal to Rota's royal family, but the Kashal didn't truly have a centralized leader. Elders governed some of the larger settlements, but that was all. One of the elders whose village was on the bank of the Saha river commanded many men; most of them were Shihana's cousins. They would almost certainly support her over Sufar, but that wasn't the case for the other Kashal settlements.

Sufar's apprentice, Mark, was the man who had pulled Tanda out of the prison jar during their escape from Shihana. Mark had also tracked down Balsa and Asra in the woods after their escape from the inn at the Herb Market. He almost never spoke, but he seemed honest and decent enough--and he was definitely loyal to Sufar. Before meeting up with Sufar and Tanda, Mark had chased after Balsa's caravan with all the patience and care of a master hunter. He'd returned to that task shortly after Sufar and Tanda's escape.

After he left, Sufar said, "Mark will find Balsa and Asra. We don't need to worry about what will happen until we reach Jitan. In the meantime, there are other things we can do."

Tanda objected strongly to having Mark search for Balsa alone. He was worried about what might happen if Shihana caught up to her first. But when Sufar told Tanda what he knew of Shihana's movements, he let himself be convinced of the effectiveness of Sufar's plan.

"Shihana wants to change the kingdom of Rota overnight," Sufar said. "She won't waste more time chasing Asra when she already knows exactly where she's going. She sees all of this like a game of tarzu. Asra is an important piece on the game board, but Shihana doesn't need to capture Asra herself in order to manipulate her. We need to try to understand this situation from Shihana's perspective if we're going to defeat her."

Sufar and Tanda traveled for several days, keeping their ears open for any recent news. They rested in a secret place deep in the woods that was close to a Tal temple. The Tal Kumada who served there were people that Sufar had known for years; from them, Sufar learned that the Tal Kumada were not cooperating with Shihana's plot. Some hadn't heard of it at all.

As Sufar and Tanda got closer to Jitan, Sufar discovered that some of the Tal people harbored secrets that laid hidden like water beneath the ground of a marsh. Some of them knew that the Hasal Ma Talhamaya river was flowing again and what that might mean for their people. Now was the time for the Tal people to honor their ancient promises.

The Tal Kumada had drilled a fear of Talhamaya into all the Tal people for generations, but some of the people Sufar talked to quietly hoped for the god's return. Some of the Ramau were teaching an alternate history of the Tal people that cast Sada Talhamaya in a more favorable light and warped the minds of some of the Tal people, especially the younger generation.

The rumor that the Chamau had appeared and would become Sada Talhamaya reborn spread through the Tal people like wildfire. The massacre at Shintadan prison also became common knowledge; some claimed it to be a sign of Talhamaya's wrath toward the Rotan people. People who thought this way hoped that the Chamau would unite with the god and liberate the Tal people from their long years of oppression. Many Tal people who feared Talhamaya were so embittered against the Rotans that they preferred her return over further suffering. Pockets of Tal rebellion broke out all along Sufar and Tanda's route.

No one knew who was spreading the rumors, but the Tal Kumada that Sufar spoke to all seemed deeply concerned about them. They suspected that the Rotans were spreading them to bolster their own position so that they could display their hostility toward the Tal people more openly. None of the Tal Kumada believed that the rumors about the Chamau were true, but they saw the effect of them on the Tal people who lived in their settlements. They'd been forced to reprimand apprentices who had taught people that Talhamaya's power could restore the Tal people's dignity and honor. The Tal people were sick of hiding in the shadows; they wanted to live freely and openly again without any prejudice or fear.

The darkness that the Tal people lived in had become a heavy burden over the years. Many of the Tal people didn't want to pass that burden to their children. They saw Talhamaya as a symbol of a brighter future for themselves and their families.

The rumors became increasingly thick on the ground the closer they got to Jitan. In the Tal settlement closest to Jitan, the local Ramau had taken up arms and shut themselves inside their temple with the Tal Kumada priests they were supposed to serve.

Sufar spied on the settlement through his hawk's eyes and saw many of Shihana's supporters scattered among the Ramau. It seemed that the Ramau and the Kashal had joined forces to change the Tal people's perception of Talhamaya.

And that wasn't all--Sufar heard more troubling rumors about Rota's northern clan lords. Most of these rumors centered around Prince Ihan and his role in supporting the interests of the north over the interests of the south. Some of the Kashal they met said that Prince Ihan would have to save northern Rota from an encroaching threat, and soon.

Tanda thought that these rumors were maddening; none of them ever specified what Prince Ihan was supposed so save northern Rota from, or why. He learned from listening in on Sufar's conversations that most of the younger clan lords in the north supported Prince Ihan and that the southern clan lords were behaving suspiciously. All of the southern clan lords were raising armies in secret under the pretense of hiring guards for their journey to Rota's Ritual Hall for the founding ceremony of the nation. They would probably make their move sometime in Shasam, the first month of the new year; the founding ceremony was held in the Ritual Hall at Jitan on the twenty-second day of Shasam.

Jitan had been built on the ruins of Rotarbal's capital city. King Kiran defeated Sada Talhamaya in the same place where the Ritual Hall was now. Every clan lord from northern and southern Rota would gather in the the Ritual Hall for the ceremony. The southern clan lords were already making preparations to travel to Jitan. The number of guards they were bringing easily doubled what they'd brought with them in previous years. When the royal family sent messages pointing out this discrepancy, the southern clan lords claimed that they'd heard troubling rumors from the north and wanted to be especially cautious this year.

King Yosam was abroad in Sangal for the new King's coronation ceremonies, so Prince Ihan would be leading the ceremony of the founding of Rota this year. Many of the other Kashal had warned Prince Ihan to be on his guard. Tanda thought there were too many motives

and plots in play; it was impossible to predict how everything would turn out.

Tanda and Sufar hid in a low stone cave and prepared a simple meal of milk tea and skewered vegetables. Tanda looked up from his skewer and said, “Sufar?”

“Hm?”

“Do you think you have a good idea of everything Shihana’s planning now?”

Sufar stroked the back feathers of the hawk on his shoulder, then nodded. “Yes, I think so. Everything is so uncertain right now. I feel like the country might be swept away by a wave at any moment. Shihana caused part of this instability, but not all of it. The north and the south have always valued different things, and the royal family has always struggled to unite them. The terrifying god of the Tal people has returned to Rota after hundreds of years. Any one of these factors or events would be capable of destroying Rota on its own, but all of them together...” He shook his head. “It’s hard to even imagine devastation on such a scale.”

Sufar’s hawk, Shau, narrowed his eyes and blinked sleepily. He was clearly comfortable sitting on Sufar’s shoulder.

“My ancestors didn’t just hand down the history of Rotarbal to us,” Sufar said. “I know a great deal more of Rota’s history than that. There have been other crisis points in history that are similar to what we’re experiencing now. I think of the flow of time like the flow of a river--never constant and always changing. A river can flow sluggishly one day and overflow with rainwater the next.

“History is the same. We assign patterns to past events that seem related, even if they’re just coincidences. If enough unfortunate coincidences happen at the same time, the country is engulfed in a great wave of destruction and change.”

Sufar narrowed his eyes. “Shihana didn’t really cause any of this. She just saw it coming before everyone else, somehow. She’s made herself a

lifeboat to ride out the wave. She's been widening the scope of her acquaintances and strengthening her relationships with her allies over the past few years. I knew she was doing that; I observed it. She's a natural leader and has no trouble convincing most people to follow her. She has a gift for predicting outcomes and maneuvering people into the roles she's chosen for them. It seems that she has both the younger Kashal and the Ramau working for her now." Sufar's tone was faintly tinged with pride. He cleared his throat and changed the subject.

"The Kashal have been expecting the situation between the southern clan lords and the royal family to come to a head sooner or later. Shihana always thought that the southern lords would assassinate Prince Ihan as soon as King Yosam died so that they could seize power for themselves.

"Prince Ihan is the first in line for Rota's throne, but all the southern lords are related to the royal family by blood. King Yosam is tremendously popular, so they can't risk making a move until after he's dead. Prince Ihan is reasonably popular in the north, but the older lords don't support him."

Tanda stared at his skewer roasting over the fire and tilted his head to the side. "But King Yosam isn't in Rota right now. He's not dead, but he is gone. Now might be a goof time for the southern clan lords to strike."

"I agree. I think that doubling their guard in such a blatant and obvious way is intended as a threat. I don't know anything else about their military preparations, but I understand their general attitude toward the north and Prince Ihan. They're probably flaunting their guards in our faces in order to show their contempt for us." Sufar ruffled the feathers on Shau's neck and nodded to himself.

"King Yosam sure picked a perfect time to go to Sangal, didn't he?" Tanda muttered. "It's a good thing he left Prince Ihan in charge, at least, and not those greedy southern clan lords."

"You're more right than you know," Sufar said. "I've heard that the southern clan lords are in league with the Talsh empire. That's the main

reason King Yosam went to Sangal. Sangal is the wall that protects our nation from being attacked by the southern continent. Our alliance with Sangal has always been strong, but King Yosam gets few opportunities to meet with their King in person."

"I'm glad I'm a commoner," Tanda said with a grin. He passed Sufar a skewer of vegetables that had been cooked thoroughly. "What does Asra have to do with politics and the royal family?"

Sufar twirled the skewer Tanda gave him to cool it off. "I think Shihana intends to use Asra to save Prince Ihan from the southern lords."

"So you think she wants to use Asra as a weapon?"

Sufar hunched in on himself, then nodded. "I'm worried about King Yosam's health."

Tanda blinked in confusion, but Sufar didn't seem to notice his reaction.

"Everyone close to the King has seen now much he's deteriorated over the course of the past year or so. He developed a high fever a year ago and has suffered intermittently with them ever since. His father died of a similar disease."

Tanda tilted his head. "And? I still don't understand what any of this has to do with Asra. Let's say that King Yosam dies and Prince Ihan succeeds him. Where does Asra fit in? Will Shihana use her to attack the southern clan lords?"

Sufar sighed. "Probably. When King Yosam dies, the southern clan lords will almost certainly plunge our nation into chaos. The north and the south will go to war. Such a conflict would be long and bloody and pointless, but I see no way to prevent it."

"I understand that much, but I don't understand what Shihana's expecting Asra to do. Even Talhamaya's power wouldn't be enough to stop a war. It might not even be powerful enough to end one. I doubt Asra wants to use her power to kill half the country."

Tanda looked down at the cup of hot tea in his hand with a severe expression. "I don't understand how Shihana would be able to convince

Asra to help her, either...but there it is. She can't afford to lose. I think she's known Asra for a long time. She might be able to leverage that somehow."

Tanda suddenly remembered something Sufar had told him just a few days ago. Prince Ihan had ordered Shihana to find the Tal woman that he was in love with after she disappeared. Supposedly, Shihana had spent long years looking for her without success, but what if that was a lie? Sufar clearly didn't know that Shihana had found Torisha or that she'd been Prince Ihan's lover. Tanda wouldn't have figured that out if Chikisa hadn't told him everything he knew about his mother.

That meant that Shihana had known where Torisha was for all this time--years, certainly--and she hadn't told anyone. Not her father, and certainly not Prince Ihan. Sufar had only learned that Shihana and Asra had met before after she'd put him under house arrest before he escaped with Tanda. Tanda wondered why Shihana had kept Torisha's location secret.

"Maybe Shihana intended to use Talhamaya's power from the start. Why else would she get close to Torisha and not tell anyone?" Tanda asked.

Sufar's eyes widened. He shook his head in firm denial. "No, that can't be true. Her mother couldn't possibly know that Asra would be the Chamau. She had no talent for magic weaving."

Sufar remembered Shihana telling him the secret of her mastery of the strategy game called tarzu: "All you need to do is imagine the shape your victory will take, then guide your opponent into the right position with your own moves. That's all there is to it."

Sufar shook his head again. Shihana could not possibly have made Asra into the Chamau simply to suit her own purposes. And inviting Talhamaya into this world was a crime punishable by death. The Tal people had been conditioned to fear Talhamaya for generations. No matter what Shihana told Torisha, Sufar doubted that she would have sacrificed her own child in such a cause.

But then a horrifying possibility crossed his mind: what if Shihana had been the one to identify Asra? What if she'd known about her power well before the Shintadan massacre and used what happened at Shintadan as an experiment of some kind to show off what Talhamaya could do? If Shihana really had known Asra for a long time, she'd be able to manipulate her easily. He shared this theory with Tanda. "She probably didn't want to show her hand in things until she was certain she could win."

Tanda sank into silent thought. He took small sips of milk tea and tried to think through what Sufar had just told him.

"It's unthinkable for one of the Kashal to encourage the Tal people to bring back Talhamaya. It's antithetical to who we are. But Shihana has always disregarded many of our customs and laws while ignoring others." A shadow passed over Sufar's face. "I can only guess at her motivations, but I think she was captivated by the idea of Sada Talhamaya's power. I can almost hear her say it: 'If I had that much power at my disposal, there'd be no limit to what I could do. I could use it to make the world a better place for everyone.'

"But thinking of Talhamaya's power that way is foolish. Her power surpasses human understanding. It's too much for any one person to control. Even the kindest and wisest person in possession of such power would be corrupted into a tyrant. I'm certain that the original Sada Talhamaya was corrupted in just such a way."

Shau made a sleepy sound on Sufar's shoulder.

"Shihana knew how destructive Talhamaya's power was, of course, but she never seemed disturbed by it. She's always confident that she can handle anything. She's also ruthless in pursuit of her goals. I think she would give up anything to succeed, including her own life--or someone else's."

Sufar stared into the fire. Thinking of Shihana's ruthlessness made him remember the time his wife had locked the front door and thrown away the key so that Sufar wouldn't be able to enter. Shihana found the key and placed it into a flower pot that her doting grandfather had

given to her as a little girl. No matter how many times her mother tried to remove the key so that she could lock Sufar out again, the key wouldn't come out. Shihana had used magic weaving to keep it inside the pot.

Eventually, Sufar's wife became so frustrated that she smashed the pot into a dozen pieces. Shihana found the key and passed it to her mother, then started cleaning up the fragments of the pot in silence.

Sufar's relationship with his wife had always been a difficult one. The pot Shihana had placed the key in was precious to her; it was a gift made by someone who loved her. Having her mother shatter it in pursuit of her own desires acted as an object lesson for Shihana; it was why she was willing to sacrifice anything now.

Sufar could still remember Shihana's expressionless face and cold, colorless eyes in the days that followed the pot's breaking.

Sufar turned away from the fire and began to eat. He added a bit of salt to the vegetables on his skewer and took a sip of his tea, then shifted to face Tanda.

"Shihana won't hesitate to do anything in order to get what she wants. Anyone who gets in her way will be treated as an enemy. That includes me." He sounded genuinely regretful.

"She didn't kill you when she caught you," Tanda said. "Even Shihana must have some limits."

Sufar blinked. "I suspect she just underestimated me. She knows that I won't do anything to hurt her. Not deliberately, anyway." Sufar added some dried meat to his skewer.

He's right. I don't think Sufar is capable of hurting Shihana, Tanda thought. He was traveling with Sufar now, but that wouldn't be true forever. If Sufar's actions ultimately served Shihana's purposes, then Tanda owed it to Balsa, Asra and Chikisa to do everything he could to protect them. Sufar and Tanda were working at cross purposes, so Tanda had no choice but to consider Sufar an enemy as well. Tanda coughed from the fire's smoke and looked up.

Balsa. Where are you? Are you looking at the sky right now?

The low clouds and oppressive dampness were sure signs that it was going to snow again soon.

“We should sleep,” Sufar said. “We’ll get to Jitan in three days at this rate. We’ll probably get caught in one of Shihana’s traps on the way there, and I’d rather not be exhausted when that happens.”

Tanda nodded. Rota’s winter nights were bitterly cold; Tanda felt the wind cut through him even though he slept near the fire and was covered by several layers of blankets. He dozed fitfully throughout the night, but found it hard to stay asleep for long.

Tanda dreamed about Balsa. Not Balsa as she was now, but Balsa when she’d been twelve or thirteen years old. She was standing at the entrance to a cave, soaking wet and pale as a ghost. Her teeth chattered as she hugged herself and shivered violently. Her lips were turning blue.

Tanda got to his feet and ran to her. He hugged her close and rubbed her arms and chest, trying to warm her up. He needed blankets or a fire. She was as cold as a block of ice. The more he tried to help, the colder she got until she went transparent like water and completely disappeared.

Tanda jerked awake. His hands and his arms were freezing; he felt like he really had just tried rubbing warmth back into Balsa’s frozen limbs. Maybe the dream had been more than a dream? He broke out in a cold sweat.

Balsa...you can’t be... You’re fine. Right?

He was so terrified that he forgot to breathe. Had he just seen Balsa’s spirit? Had she come to tell him that she was dead? His face drained of blood and he started shaking uncontrollably.

“What’s wrong?” Sufar asked.

Tanda didn’t say anything. He stared up at the sky and shook. Even if he tried a Soul Call now, it might be too late to find Balsa’s spirit.

Please let it be just a dream...

Tanda shut his eyes tight.

Sufar frowned deeply. He saw something moving out of the corner of his eye and focused on the cave's entrance. A wolf was sitting just outside, shining silver-white in the light of the moon. The wolf was so still and silent that it looked like a statue carved of ice.

Sufar looked into the wolf's eyes and knew immediately whose soul the wolf was sharing. Sufar slowly lifted his hand and beckoned the wolf inside.

Chapter 2 - The Tal Trappers

The day before Tanda's horrible dream, Mark of the Kashal followed Balsa and a group of Tal trappers and merchants to the banks of the Sai river. It was one of the worst days of his life so far.

He'd been so careful. He'd come all this way--but Balsa was clever, so he was always forced to travel quite a bit behind her so she wouldn't spot him. By the time he reached the bridge that spanned the river, the battle that had taken place there was almost over.

The bridge was completely destroyed. Mark climbed a tree and surveyed the scene from a higher vantage point. He saw no sign of Balsa or Asra, which meant they'd probably already crossed to the other side. It would take a significant amount of time to find another way across so he could keep following them.

Mark jumped from tree to tree like a monkey so that he could see the broken bridge better. A large group of armed men stood near it. He wasn't about to engage such a large number of warriors, so all he could do now was wait for them to leave. The battlefield might give him some clues as to where Balsa was headed next.

Then Balsa dashed through the trees beneath him and attacked the warriors near the bridge, peeling them off in groups of two and three so that she could engage them under the cover of the trees. Mark had no intention of helping her fight them; the two of them couldn't possibly win against such overwhelming numbers.

This was the first time Mark witnessed Balsa's superhuman strength and speed. She fought like a demon or a god; men went down from blows from her spear and didn't rise. Mark realized that Balsa had let him off lightly in their encounter; she could have done far worse.

As he watched the men surround Balsa and chase her through the trees, Mark felt the stirrings of frustration with himself. This wasn't fair.

He watched Balsa cut the remaining rope binding the bridge to this side and fall into the gorge along with the bridge.

Mark closed his eyes and prayed that Balsa would survive somehow.

Then she dropped into the frozen river, still gripping her spear. Mark doubted that she could be saved from the river before she froze to death.

The warriors picked up their fallen comrades and retreated. Mark climbed down from his tree and approached the riverbank. He measured the gap in front of him with his eyes and shook his head. He might be able to jump the gap as a mountain goat, but not on his own two legs.

He looked down at the river and shivered. He saw no sign of Balsa anywhere. Even if she'd summoned the strength to swim out of the river and climb up the side of the ravine, she would probably die of hypothermia soon.

Mark's fingers were numb. *I should worry about myself, here, not just her.*

It seemed that Asra had crossed the river, so he needed to reach the other side and pick up her trail as soon as possible. It was already getting dark. He wouldn't be able to search for another bridge in total darkness. Mark decided that it would be faster to descend into the ravine, find a shallow place to cross the river, and climb up the other side.

Climbing down took longer than he expected. The sky was gray and dim by the time he was level with the river. He walked downstream and looked for a place to make camp. When he scented the air, he smelled smoke. The Shan forest was on the other side of the river, so there shouldn't be any Rotans nearby. That meant the smoke was coming from a Tal fire.

Mark kept walking in the direction the smoke was wafting from until he discovered fresh footprints in the snow. The footprints were large and deep: a man's, carrying something heavy. He followed the

footprints to the door of a small hut that looked and smelled like it belonged to some Tal trappers.

Mark heard voices on the other side of the door. He lifted his hand to knock, but then hesitated. He didn't want to disturb anyone, but he would have to unless he wanted to pass the night outside.

Mark knocked on the door. The voices inside the hut fell silent. After a long pause, someone came to the door and opened it a crack.

"And who are you?" The man's voice was hoarse, but his tone was polite.

"I'm a magic weaver. My name is Mark. The sun set before I could make camp, and now the storm is getting worse. I hate to ask, but may I stay in your hut for the night?"

When the other men inside overheard that he was a magic weaver, they started whispering among themselves.

"Why would a magic weaver be here?"

"If he wanted to attack us, he wouldn't have shown himself."

Mark cleared his throat. "I don't intend to harm anyone," he said. "All I want is a night's rest out of the snow and cold. Please believe me."

The man in front of him took a deep breath, then opened the door fully to let Mark in. Smoke stung Mark's eyes as he entered. It was much warmer inside the hut than outside thanks to a fire in the center of the room. He smelled thick smoke from the fire and the sharp smell of newly tanned leather.

There were three older men already in the room, all gathered around the fire. Two people were also lying down on a huge wolf pelt near the center of the room.

"Pardon my intrusion," Mark said. "I'll only be staying for the night." He bowed his head.

The three men eyed him warily, but didn't say or do anything to prevent him from coming closer to the fire. As his eyes adjusted to the low light inside the hut, Mark discerned that two of the old men were

trappers and one was a Tal Kumada priest. When Mark turned his eyes to the two people lying on the wolf pelt, he swallowed hard.

"Balsa?" he knelt down next to her. Her wet black hair stuck to her face, which was as pale as death. He extended his hand above her nose and mouth, but couldn't feel her breathing.

"Do you know this woman?" one of the Tal trappers asked. "She was found floating in the river not far from here. We couldn't just let a dead body stay in one of our sacred rivers, so we brought her here. We thought she was dead, but Shinzai says she's still alive." He gestured to the Tal Kumada priest.

Mark placed his trembling fingers to the pulse point on Balsa's neck. Her skin was as cold as ice, but he could feel the faint, unsteady rhythm of her heartbeat. "She's alive!" he said. He was openly relieved. He faced the Tal trappers and said, "We need to warm her up, now. Do you have any more furs or blankets?"

His eyes fell on the man lying next to Balsa. He still hadn't moved.

"Huh? Uncle Aram?" Mark and Aram belonged to the same Kashal tribe. He suddenly remembered that this part of the Shan forest was Aram's assigned area to patrol and keep watch over.

"Don't touch him," Shinzai said. "Aram is currently projecting his soul."

Mark nodded in understanding. Aram was a very powerful magic weaver who could establish a soul connection with an animal for hours or even days at a time, much like Shihana and Sufar. Very few of the Kashal had this ability.

Why was a Tal Kumada priest here? Why was Aram patrolling now? What did he expect to find? Mark had too many questions; he found it difficult to focus on just one. He looked up at the Tal Kumada priest, Shinzai, who was sitting in a chair in the corner of the room. Mark swallowed down his anxiety and asked, "Do you often stay here when you're not traveling through sacred Tal lands?"

Shinzai's expression was complicated. "Yes, though this area is not so much consecrated ground as it is a soldier's camp. The Rotans have

crept further and further into the woods over the years. This is not a good place to pray or give thanks to the gods."

Mark nodded again. He should have guessed based on how these Tal people were behaving that this place wasn't too close to sacred ground. Shihana's allies wouldn't have attacked the bridge if it was. Mark knew that Aram was completely loyal to Sufar. More than that, Aram's single-minded determination and focus wasn't a good fit for Shihana and her complicated scheming. Aram was probably running through the woods as a wolf now to report the current situation to Sufar.

The twenty-second day of Shasam was fast approaching; Sufar had to get to Jitan before then. That probably meant he was somewhere nearby right now. He might even come to this hut at Aram's invitation.

Mark shifted his focus to Balsa. She was still unconscious and still breathing. Her clothes were soaked through; they would have to be removed before warming her up. The trappers brought Mark all the extra blankets and furs they had, then averted their eyes as Mark stripped Balsa of her clothes quickly and efficiently. He covered her immediately with the dry blankets and furs, then flipped her over to dry her back.

Mark saw a long, thin cut extending from her shoulder to her hip and gasped. It was fortunate that she'd fallen into the frozen river so soon after being wounded. The cut wasn't bleeding at all now, but as soon as she got warm, it would probably gush. As he laid her down again and covered her, he noticed another long, thin cut along her left side. It had been stitched closed previously, but those stitches had burst during her fight.

Mark sighed. The Kashal were given medical training as part of their education, but he wasn't particularly good at treating wounds.

He faced the Tal trappers and the Tal Kumada priest again. "Do any of you have any strong alcohol? I want to treat her injuries."

One of the trappers handed him a small bottle of wine. "Just who is this woman?" he asked. "She was clutching that spear over there so tight that it took two of us together to make her let go of it."

“She’s a bodyguard and uses a spear,” Mark said. Then he turned his full attention to Balsa’s injuries.

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A few days later, Sufar and Tanda arrived outside the hut a little before noon. Balsa was about to freeze to death when she first entered the hut, but now she was burning up with a high fever. Mark had spent the previous night watching over her. When Sufar knocked on the door of the hut, Mark was asleep while sitting upright next to Balsa.

As the door opened, Aram awoke and let out a long groan. The trappers gathered around him, asking him where he’d been and what he’d seen. The Tal Kumada priest Shinzai remained quietly in his corner.

When Sufar came in and saw Mark, his eyes widened. “Mark? Why are you here?”

Mark opened his mouth to answer, then noticed another man rushing in behind Sufar. He saw Mark, looked down at Balsa, and cried out wordlessly as he dashed across the room.

The man pushed Mark out of the way with surprising force, then knelt down next to Balsa. “Balsa?”

He didn’t seem to notice Mark or Aram at all. He felt Balsa’s forehead with shaking hands, then checked to see if her pupils were dilated. After that, he checked her pulse.

Mark remembered him now. This was Tanda, the man he and Sufar had rescued from the prison jar. Mark hadn’t thought him capable of the kind of utter desperation that he was seeing now, but there it was.

Aram came back to himself slowly. He’d connected his soul to a wolf’s for days, so at first all he could do was look around himself and blink in confusion. He had no idea who Balsa was or when she and Mark had arrived.

Sufar addressed Mark and Aram and shared the details of his journey so far. Mark told Sufar about the attack on Balsa and Asra at the bridge

over the Sai river. Asra had been led away by the Tal people.

“I wanted to follow them into their sacred lands, but then I found uncle Aram and Balsa. I thought I’d wait until he came back from his patrol to consult with Aram and gather information. I heard from that Tal Kumada priest over there that this area isn’t safe. Rotan soldiers and other fighters have been showing up in numbers lately. I had no way of confirming if this was true or not, but I didn’t want to enter Tal lands without more help or information. I decided that even if Aram woke up soon, I’d still wait for you to get here, Sufar.”

Sufar nodded. “You decided wisely, Mark. Aram, please tell us all what you saw as you ran through Shan forest.”

Aram took a deep breath, shook his head to clear it, and focused on Sufar. “Five days ago, a large number of Kashal warriors from the Rawal settlement crossed into Tal sacred territory. They captured me and took me with them. Then the Ramau guided them further into the woods and prepared a place to make camp.

“Shihana came to the camp two nights after my capture,” Aram said. His voice was harsh from long disuse. “There was a brief moment when everyone was distracted after she arrived, so I used that chance to escape. I wanted to share my knowledge of Shihana’s movements with you, so I ran to you as a wolf and guided you back here.”

Aram frowned deeply. “What the hell is going on, Sufar? Since when are the Ramau and the Kashal allies? What is Shihana planning?”

“We live in tragic times, Aram. Talhamaya has returned to this world.”

Aram stared into Sufar’s eyes and nodded slightly in sad understanding.

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Dim light danced under Balsa’s eyelids when she awoke. She could hear the crackling of a fire nearby. She tried to move, but her body felt like it wasn’t her own. She felt like a snake or a reptile trapped beneath layers of old skin. She was so exhausted that she’d probably fall back asleep again at any moment.

Her face was warm. A soft blanket brushed against her cheek. She felt sore and pained all over, but she smelled something very familiar and comforting that kept her calm. She couldn't see much in the dim light of the fire, but she could make out the shapes of other people in the dark. She could hear their snores and deep breathing as they slept.

Balsa tried to turn over and realized that someone was cradling her head on their arm.

"Balsa, are you awake?"

Balsa's eyes snapped open. "Tanda?" When she realized that Tanda had been holding her as she slept, she blinked. This was a dream, right?

Tanda smiled at her in relief. "Wait a minute. I'll get you some water." Tanda carefully extricated himself from Balsa and stood up. He tiptoed across the room and filled a cup with water from a deep basin. Then he tiptoed back to Balsa and handed her the cup. The cool, clear water soothed her fever-parched throat.

"This hut belongs to some Tal trappers. I'll tell you everything I know about how we both got here, but first you should take your medicine."

Balsa placed the bitter pill that Tanda gave her in her mouth and swallowed.

"I'd have something better to give you if we were home, but there are limited supplies here. Still, that pill is better than nothing. It'll prevent your wounds from getting infected."

Tanda laid down next to Balsa again and started whispering voicelessly to her as they'd often done as children so that they wouldn't wake Jiguro or Torogai.

"You're the luckiest woman alive. When I saw your spirit, I was sure that you were dead." Tanda kept whispering without waiting for her reply, as if he was speaking to himself. Balsa closed her eyes halfway and just listened.

The fog in her mind cleared gradually as Tanda spoke; eventually, she gathered the presence of mind to ask some questions. "Where am I? Why am I here?"

Tanda told her. He also told her that Shihana and Sufar were working against one another, just as she'd suspected. The threads of various schemes and plots came unraveled as she understood the entire situation more clearly. She couldn't believe how fortunate she was to be here with Tanda now. It seemed completely impossible.

But as the immediate present came back to her, Balsa felt needled by remembered pain and regret. She'd been foolish enough to trust Ianu simply because she was Tal, and that foolishness had led to Asra being snatched away from her. Tanda's long story of how she'd gotten here made no mention of Asra.

When he finally stopped speaking, Balsa opened her eyes and said, "So Sufar and Mark aren't here anymore?" She could only hear three other people in the room aside from herself and Tanda.

"Yeah. He and Mark went to Jitan this morning. They're hoping to catch up to Shihana before she gets there."

Balsa sighed. Her fever was so high that it was hard to talk, so she could only complain internally at the news that Sufar was already gone

"Is it the middle of Shasam already?" Balsa asked. " We don't have much time. Shihana must have found some way to manipulate Asra."

"Well, she does have Chikisa," Tanda said. "Sufar told me that she knew Asra's mother, too."

Balsa remembered Asra waking from a dream where her brother had blamed and accused her with despair in his eyes. Overcome with exhaustion, she slept again.

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The next morning, Balsa woke up to find the hut almost empty. The trappers had gone to the forest that morning, so only the Tal Kumada priest was still in the hut. Balsa thought she must have dreamed that Tanda was here with her when she woke up and found him missing, but then the door of the hut opened and he came in from outside. He was carrying a basin full of fresh water.

“Oh, you’re up.” Tanda set the water down and crouched down next to Balsa so that he could check on her fever.

“As always, you’re mending up just fine. You still have a fever, but it’s slight. Mark’s not very good at stitches, but it seems like he at least learned the basics of medicine at some point. You’re lucky you fell into the river when you did and that you were found just after so that you wouldn’t freeze. Mark’s convinced that that’s the only reason you didn’t bleed to death. And your layers of clothes also kept you from freezing before you got here. Did you know that you refused to let go of your spear, even when you were unconscious? That was lucky, too--the pose helped you keep your head above water.”

Tanda transferred something from a coal-black pan over the fire into a bowl, then placed the bowl onto a low table. There was a jar of honey on the table as well. Tanda lifted the lid off the jar, added a little honey to the bowl, then handed the bowl and a spoon to Balsa.

“It’s wheat gruel,” Tanda said. “I also put milk in it, as much as the trappers could spare. Try to eat as much as you can.”

Balsa took a single bite of the gruel. Tanda looked at her with a dissatisfied expression until she ate quite a bit more. She took careful sips of hot tea and somehow managed to eat the entire bowl of gruel, but it took a long time. She wanted to rest again after eating, but the wound on her back gave her trouble when she stretched out. She had to lie face-down to get any relief at all from the pain.

Tanda tapped his chin in thought, then sat down with his back to the wall near the room’s fire pit. He pulled Balsa closer carefully and rested her head on his knees so that her back wouldn’t have to touch the ground.

Balsa shifted a little to find a position where the rest of her injuries didn’t hurt, then took a deep breath. “I must have slept for an entire day.”

“Yeah.”

“So today is...the seventeenth day of Shasam?”

Tanda frowned. “Balsa...”

“Jitan is two days from here on horseback. I have to be able to move by tomorrow morning, or I’ll never make it.”

Tanda didn’t say anything for a while. The two of them sat in silence, listening to the popping and crackling of the fire.

Tanda sighed. “I guess we’re going, then. We have to find out what happened to the kids--though I’m not sure there’s much we can do for them in this state.”

Balsa stayed quiet and simply listened.

“This whole situation has gotten out of control,” Tanda said. “I’m sure that Asra and Chikisa are going to be led before Prince Ihan soon.” He sounded bitterly regretful. “Prince Ihan has always tried to help the Tal people, though, so I don’t think he’ll hurt them. Shihana’s probably exploiting both him and the kids for her own purposes.”

Balsa remembered that Asra believed that Talhamaya was a god that punished evil people and helped good people. The Tal people were obviously split down the middle when it came down to what they believed. Asra’s mother had given up her lover and fled into hiding; her grief and regret had twisted her interpretation of the god into a potential savior of the Tal people. She’d passed that interpretation down to her children. Asra still believed it.

Balsa was forced to consider the possibility that Asra would unite with Talhamaya because of her mother’s wishes. She could see Asra drunk on power as she slaughtered the wolves in her mind’s eye. Asra would transform into the terrible god that controlled that power. She would unleash Talhamaya’s wrath on other people, maybe even a lot of them. She would ascend to the heavens surrounded by lightning and clouds and no one would ever be able to touch her again. That was the only future Balsa could see for her now, but she refused to believe that was the only possible future Asra could have.

“Asra’s only twelve years old,” Balsa muttered. She remembered how much Asra had cried when Chikisa had judged her in her dreams. She completely understood Asra’s way of thinking. She understood the desire to kill the people that she hated. She’d felt the same sense of raw

and unrestricted power as Asra before when she'd killed people herself. She remembered falling into her own hatred and darkness and not being able to find a way out.

Balsa closed her eyes and tried to remember her twelve-year-old self. She had only just started to yearn for constant battle and bloodshed then. She remembered how powerful and alive she'd felt when she attacked the bully that had tormented her for so long. Whenever she'd caught a glimpse of the darkness engulfing her, she'd lashed out violently and explained away her actions using her unfortunate circumstances.

Balsa knew her true self very well. She was the darkness that lurked at the bottom of her heart. The only reason she didn't simply close her eyes and wait for her life to end was that doing that seemed even worse than the darkness.

I wonder why I met Asra.

She remembered Asra at Martha's store, dressed in clothes the color of sarayu flowers and glowing with happiness. She wasn't like Balsa at all. She was sweet and kind and just a child--but she, too, had a darkness inside her. She hadn't faced it yet, but that didn't mean it wasn't there.

"Tanda. We're leaving tomorrow night, right?"

Tanda nodded. "We need to be careful. Shihana planned all of this. Sufar told me that she takes the long view of most situations, which means she can probably guess what we're going to do. Her plan involves everyone--the royal family, the Tal people, the other Kashal, Asra and Chikisa, and us. It's like she's playing a game on a vast scale, and all of us are pieces."

"It doesn't matter to me if Shihana sees all of this as a game or not," Balsa said. She closed her eyes for a few seconds. "Even if it's a game among kings and gods, it doesn't matter." She opened her eyes. "I can't forgive her for manipulating Asra into killing people by using memories of her mother." Balsa's voice became softer as she spoke.

“Someone needs to tell Asra how terrifying and evil it is when she kills people. I don’t think she understands that.”

Balsa gripped Tanda’s arm. “And if no one tells her, she’ll fall into the darkness forever.” Balsa rested her head against Tanda’s shoulder. She couldn’t see his face, but he was crying.

Tanda made no move to wipe his tears away. He supported Balsa in silence and stared at the rough walls of the hut.

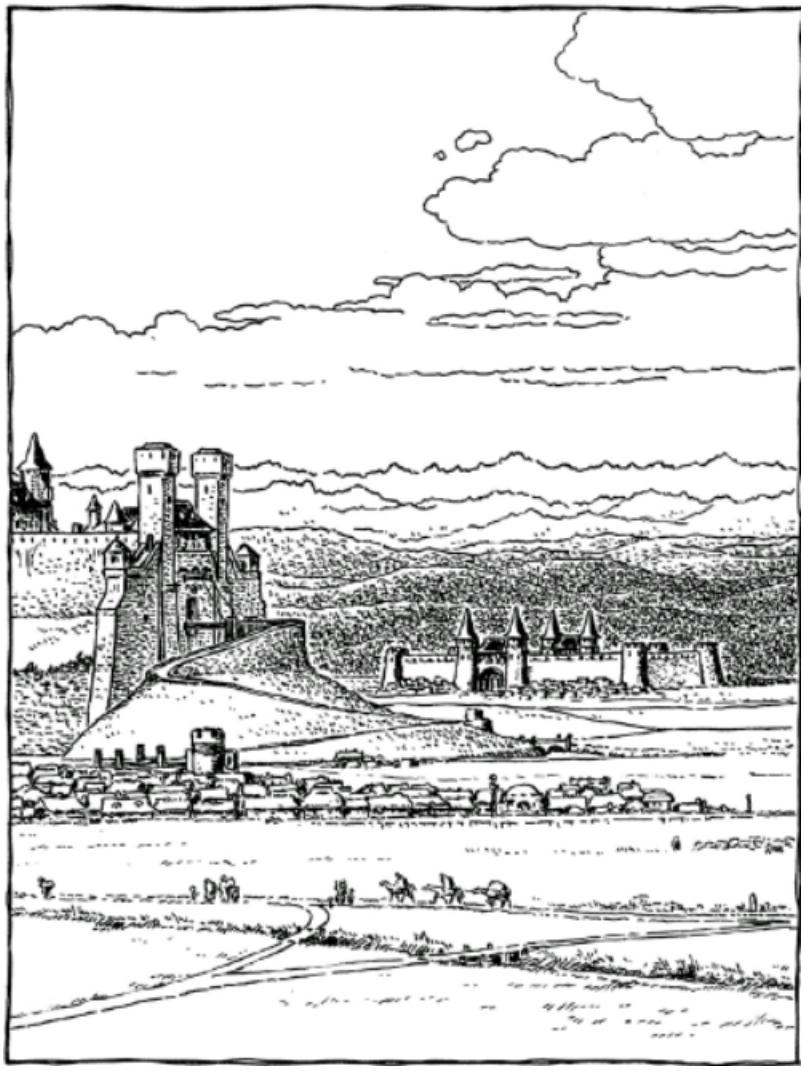
Chapter 3 - Meeting Again at Jitan

Rota's Ritual Hall had been built where the grassy plain met the edge of the Shan forest. A long line of low hills extended for miles behind the hall. The forest stretched out in front of it and encroached on the walls to either side. When viewing the Ritual Hall from the grassy plain, it seemed to lean on the tall trees that partially enclosed it.

The Ritual Hall was surrounded by high walls on every side. There were two gates at the northern and southern ends of the hall that led inside; aside from these, there was no other way in or out. Each gate was protected by two towers manned by archers and guards.

There were lower interior walls inside the two gates that also completely surrounded the Ritual Hall. The sacred site where Rota's founding ceremony was held each year was inside these walls. The road leading out of the southern gate was paved with smooth stone that cut a path through the plains and the hills beyond them.

Prince Ihan's castle was on one of the low hills near the Ritual Hall. The castle was the size of a small city and was surrounded by a moat dug into the foothills beneath it. It was almost time for Rota's founding ceremony, so many merchants were camped at the foot of the hill outside the castle to sell their wares. Travelers came from all over for the ceremony, including personal guests of the royal family, artists, artisans, and actors. Even though it was still the middle of winter, the city was lively and bright during the few days before the ceremony.



The atmosphere inside the castle was completely different. The clan lords, their guards and many guests were camped in the courtyard near Prince Ihan's personal living quarters. Some of the lords were ranked high enough to stay inside the castle, but there wasn't space inside to house everyone, especially because of the increased number of guards that the southern clan lords had brought with them. Most of the guards and warriors made tents from thick furs or blankets and slept in the courtyard. The entourages of the northern and southern clan lords self-segregated to different areas of the courtyard and didn't mingle. People from northern Rota stayed on the west side of the courtyard while people from southern Rota stayed on the east side.

The warriors and guards pitched their tents so that their openings were directly across from those on the opposite side of the courtyard. There was a tension in the air like the silence before a storm.

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Asra's wagon stopped at the edge of the forest near Rota's Ritual Hall. Asra could clearly sense water from Noyuk somewhere close by. The stream she could see was small and thin, but she could see it widening ahead of her. It seemed like Shihana couldn't see it, which worried Asra somewhat.

Asra narrowed her eyes and embraced the feeling of the cool clear water of Noyuk. Ianu seemed to sense the stream as well. She blinked and fidgeted and couldn't sit still.

We must be near the source of the stream, Asra thought. She remembered some of the prayers that her mother had chanted often:

"Beyond the snowy mountains
In the land of the gods
The long spring begins.
Clear water overflows
Into a thousand streams
And sacred moss glows in our dreams.
Wide, deep river and sacred spring,
Please accept our offerings
And grant this land your blessings.

"May the tree in the sacred spring grow forever. A girl once climbed the tree in the sacred spring and found a ring of flowers and leaves. She slipped the ring around her neck and opened the gate of the gods. Talhamaya daughter of Afal passed through that gate into our world. The girl who opened the gate lived for many years and changed the world with Talhamaya's protection. Those who rejected the god are now silent for all eternity."

"The sacred spring must be close," Asra muttered.

Shihana turned to face her. “Can you see it already? Do you see the stream leading to the spring, as it did in the legend of Sada Talhamaya?”

When Asra nodded, Shihana grinned at her. “We’re standing in the ancient capital city of Rotarbal. The place where Sada Talhamaya’s palace used to be is very close. People aren’t ordinarily allowed to approach the Ritual Hall from this direction.”

Shihana looked over the wagon driver’s shoulder and pointed. Asra could see the walls of the Ritual Hall rising up at the edge of the dense forest. Monkeys jumped from tree to tree and chattered above her head.

Asra held her breath. She was seeing two worlds superimposed over one another. This had happened to her before, but she wasn’t really used to it. She could still see the forest and the Ritual Hall, but she could also see the mirror-bright surface of the sacred spring. The tree growing from the center of it was larger than she’d ever imagined. Its trunk was as thick around as one of the castle’s towers. Its branches were as thick as young trees and extended all the way up to the sky. Blue pikuya moss clung to the tree’s trunk and branches and glittered brightly in fresh spring sunlight.

At the base of the tree, Asra saw the ruins of an old stone palace, but they were so small and faint that they almost seemed like an illusion. Everything was submerged in water from the sacred spring. She heard water flowing from the spring’s source, but she couldn’t see all the places where the water flowed from here.

Could Shihana really not see all of this? The entire wagon was underwater! Asra felt like they'd just been dropped into the center of a whirlpool.

"Stop the wagon!" Asra called out. She was shaking from head to toe. She knew that if she took a few steps forward into the spring, something would awaken within her. She felt Talhamaya stirring inside her chest and reached out for Shihana's hand.

"Stop here," Shihana commanded. "We can't enter the Ritual Hall from the front, anyway."

The wagon stopped quickly. Asra was set gently onto the ground outside. She stared at the spring and clasped her shaking hands

together. She felt like she'd just come upon a huge and majestic waterfall in the center of an old forest.

Mom, I'm here. I made it.

"What do you see, Asra?" Shihana asked.

Asra didn't turn to face her, but she pointed out all the features of the spring and the tree and described them as well as she could. "This is a place where our world and the world of the gods overlaps. No one should disturb it without good reason," she said.

Shihana nodded. "Guide us, Asra, so that we don't profane this place. We'll set up a camp close to the walls of the Ritual Hall, then you can lead us through. As you can see, the Ritual Hall is within walking distance now." Shihana's tone was respectful and almost reverent.

Ordinary Tal people and the Ramau couldn't see Noyuk as clearly as Asra, but many of them could sense it. To them, it was like the intensified pine fragrance of the deep woods where they lived. Some could also see the flickering image of the sacred spring.

Asra felt extremely self-conscious as the people surrounding the wagon bowed down and paid reverence to her. When she started walking, people rose from their worshipful poses and followed her without a word.

Asra reached the tree line and gazed own at the Ritual Hall from one of the sloped hills above it. She and the others descended the hill and made camp as far as possible from the Ritual Hall's northern gate. All told, they had five tents with them. Shihana led Asra toward the largest tent, then stood in front of the tent flaps and bowed her head.

"Please enter, Asra." She lifted one of the tent flaps. "Your brother is waiting for you."

Asra could see someone standing inside the tent. She dashed in and found Chikisa standing next to a roaring fire.

"Asra!"

Asra didn't even have time to breathe before she was swept into a tight hug. He was warm and familiar and she'd missed him so much that

she started to cry. When she did start crying, she felt like she'd never stop.

"Chikisa! Chikisa!"

Chikisa was also crying. He hugged Asra closer and choked out a sob. Shihana instructed her monkey to sit near the entrance of the tent, then left.

Asra and Chikisa sat down on chairs near the fire and shared what had happened on each of their long journeys here. It was hard for both of them to believe that their mother had only been executed two months ago. As they talked, Asra felt that she and Chikisa were very much alone and helpless again. She felt exactly like she had before she'd met Balsa.

"Chikisa, what do we do now?"

"I don't know," Chikisa muttered. "But we have to decide soon."

Asra nodded. She'd forgotten that they could decide for themselves now. Asra knew what Shihana and Ianu wanted from her; all they'd ever wanted was for her to become Sada Talhamaya. And Asra knew how to become Sada Talhamaya now. She had to enter the spring and climb the tree growing inside it. She was sure the ring of sacred mistletoe was hanging from one of the tree's branches. If she found it and put it around her neck, the ring would become a gateway for the god to enter this world and remain there permanently.

But will I even be human after that? Asra thought.

She'd only just reunited with her brother. If she became Sada Talhamaya, they wouldn't be able to live together like they had before.

"It all feels like a dream," Asra said. "Is it really my destiny to become Sada Talhamaya?"

"Yeah, it is like a dream. A long and terrible one," Chikisa said.

Asra's eyes widened. "Chikisa, have you seen Prince Ihan?"

Chikisa shook his head. "They told me we'd both go to meet him after you got here," Chikisa muttered. He stared into the fire. "Shihana told me about mom and Prince Ihan. I finally understand why she was

so terrified of Rotans, but her story is still kind of hard to believe. I don't know if I want to meet Prince Ihan or not."

Chikisa frowned. He looked like he was about to cry again. "What am I supposed to say? Am I allowed to look at him? Will I have to tell him how much mom suffered because of him?"

Silence fell as both Asra and Chikisa remembered their mother.

"My guess is that it's all a lie," Chikisa said. "Shihana always uses people. She probably made up Prince Ihan being in love with mom. It can't be true." Chikisa hid his face in his hands and cried like a little boy.

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Shihana observed Asra and Chikisa's conversation through the eyes and ears of her monkey. When Chikisa broke down crying and didn't stop for a while, she had the monkey leave the tent. She checked to make sure that the guards in front of the tent were present and alert, then broke her soul connection with the monkey and prepared to visit Prince Ihan in his castle.

Shihana didn't use the main roads to enter the castle. There were too many people in the city; she didn't want to be observed going in or out. There was an underground tunnel beneath Rota's Ritual Hall that led into the castle. This tunnel was one that only the Kashal and the royal family knew about. It was a remnant of the living areas of her ancestors, the Sul Kashal, who had built many such tunnels ages ago. Then as now, the river people of Rota preferred living underground.

The tunnel was cold and damp, but still sound even after all this time. The Sul Kashal who had built this tunnel had served Sada Talhamaya. It might even be the same tunnel that Kiran had used to sneak in to Sada Talhamaya's palace and assassinate her. Had Kiran run at full speed through this tunnel with his breath clouding his vision, just as Shihana was doing now? The tunnel was a long one; it connected the Ritual Hall to the castle and extended even further beyond that. Even Shihana didn't know exactly how long the tunnel was.

When Shihana finally arrived at the castle, she opened a secret door in the side of the tunnel. She saw someone standing just inside holding a dim light. It was her cousin Kafam, who was keeping watch over this entrance to the castle.

“Are you going to see Prince Ihan?” Kafam whispered.

Shihana nodded.

Kafam offered her a nervous smile. “Good luck.”

Shihana looked into Kafam’s eyes. Many of her friends and allies came to fear her after learning what she was capable of, but Kafam was just as smart as she was and always understood her plans. She enjoyed talking with him; he could usually get her to understand a situation from an angle she hadn’t seen before.

Both Shihana and Kafam had noticed Rota’s instability during their teenage years. Shihana knew what it was like to live in the shadows and be bound by the laws of her ancestors, so she always sympathized with the Tal people. She also understood the petty dissatisfaction of the clan lords on a fundamental level; the desperation and poverty of the north was just as obvious as the greed of the south. All of the desires and conflicts of Rota’s factions twisted and gnarled together like the roots of a huge tree. Rota itself was the tree that grew from these tangled roots, and King Yosam’s death would be the axe that cut it down.

King Yosam maintained a fragile peace that could end at any moment. He hadn’t been able to change Rota much during his reign, for better or worse. Keeping the dignity of the royal family intact and preventing war were his only real accomplishments as King.

But Yosam wouldn’t be King for much longer. When he died, all of Rota’s conflicts would come to a head at the same time. Shihana understood this clearly and was always irritated when others didn’t. Wasn’t it obvious? And weren’t the Kashal supposed to be spies for the royal family? Why hadn’t any other members of the Kashal used their knowledge and information to prevent such a dangerous situation?

Shihana closed her eyes and remembered.

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When Shihana first talked to Kafam about Rota's future, she was fourteen years old. She asked him why none of the Kashal interfered to help Rota avoid or resolve so many of the obvious conflicts she could see.

"It's impossible," Kafam said. "None of the Kashal would ever think of it. They're too stuck on their old legends and ways of thinking. Even if the ground shook beneath their feet and threatened to swallow them whole, I think they'd still try to fortify their own position instead of moving. It's just how they are." He said all this in a way that made him sound pleased at his own cleverness, but Shihana didn't think that any of what he said was clever. It didn't take much intelligence to understand the general outlines of how the Kashal thought; they'd both been taught that exact way of thinking since their early childhood. She didn't bother to call out his smugness, though. Kafam was smart and a good sounding board; she rarely asked more of him than that.

Shihana went to her room and leaned her back against the wall. She could see her dim reflection in a mirror hanging on the wall on the other side of the room. When she thought about how duty-bound and restricted by tradition the Kashal were, she wanted to vomit. Something restless moved within her and wouldn't keep still.

I want to change it. All of it. I want to change the world with my own hands.

She understood all of the forces in play that could lead to Rota's destruction. If she put her mind to it, she could neutralize them all. She could be the one who created true and lasting stability in this country.

When she thought about that, all of her frustration and irritation vanished. She felt excited, like she was setting up new strategies for tarzu before a tournament.

But I don't have all the information I need...

Usually, Shihana planned out her tarzu matches using detailed charts that meticulously listed the movements and movement combinations of each of the pieces. She knew a lot about Rota's current situation, but she didn't know how all of the pieces would move. She tried to imagine it, but she just couldn't see it.

Shihana realized that she would have to reverse engineer her usual process. She needed to envision what an ideal Rota would look like; then she could work on placing the pieces so that they'd be guided into the correct position.

Talking to Prince Ihan always gave her hope. He was as wise and kind as King Yosam, but he wasn't afraid of change. On the contrary, he wanted it--maybe even as badly as she did. Shihana believed that Prince Ihan also desired to change the world for the better. When he became King, he might get a chance to try putting his plans into action.

But Prince Ihan wouldn't be able to inherit the throne easily. With King Yosam dead, the southern clan lords would rise up and assassinate Prince Ihan so that they could seize power for themselves. Unless Prince Ihan had the full military support of the north backing him, it was unlikely that he could win a war against all of the southern clan lords.

Shihana thought of ways to increase Prince Ihan's support in the north. She wanted to create a wall of people around him that could be counted on to protect him in a time of war. She needed to prepare as far ahead as possible to give him any hope of success.

And so Shihana prepared, carefully and diligently. First, she won over many of the younger Kashal to her own way of thinking. Some of the men and women of her father's generation were also dissatisfied with the current system; Shihana fanned these flames of discontent into open rebellion. When she convinced them that her plan would make their lives a lot better in the future, she could manipulate them however she wanted.

The Kashal were trained to discover secrets, so they were incredibly valuable as allies. The only reason Shihana had been able to deceive her

father for so long was because of her thorough education as a spy. Shihana knew that she wouldn't be able to use Prince Ihan until the time was right, but her current position allowed her to pass information to him directly. With any luck, this relationship would make her appear trustworthy to him. She hoped to guide his policies when he was King so that they could both achieve their goal of changing Rota for the better.

Shihana realized at least one large flaw in her plan relatively early on. Prince Ihan's primary loyalty was to his brother, King Yosam. Even if the southern clan lords actively tried to usurp him, he would probably do everything in his power to promote peace and prevent war, just as his brother would have done. What Shihana wanted--no, needed--was the power to change Prince Ihan's mind. She wanted his primary allegiance to shift from King Yosam to her.

Finding Torisha before anyone else was an unusual stroke of good luck. She could have used Prince Ihan's love for Torisha to raise the status of the Tal people as a whole. Shihana hoped to use her at the opportune time, but she wasn't able to time things right, and Torisha had her own goals and desires. She was too afraid of being discovered by the Rotans, so she kept her head down and lived and quiet life.

Torisha was a beautiful woman, but that beauty was cast in darkness. There were times when Shihana wondered if she'd been cursed. She was also quick to anger and slow to forgive. Shihana used Torisha's rage to win her over. By promising to hide her from the people who had hurt her forever, she managed to gain Torisha's tentative trust.

Torisha was terrified of her at first. All she did was stare at Shihana with the unique brand of hostility that the Tal people reserved for the Kashal. Shihana tried everything to convince Torisha that she was her friend.

"I'm not here to bother you, or to report where you are to anyone. Please don't worry about that. I came here as an ally. I won't try to stop you from entering the forbidden forest or inviting Talhamaya back to our world.

“If you don’t trust me, you can tell any of the Tal Kumada what I just said. If you tell them that, they’ll report me to the other Kashal. I’ll lose my position, my family and my home if you do that, but I need you to understand how serious I am.”

Torisha’s glare became more curious than hostile.

“Prince Ihan still loves you.”

Torisha’s shoulders shook.

“I understand why you wanted to disappear,” Shihana said. “I won’t tell anyone where you are, not even Prince Ihan. I’ve watched over both of you for a long time. I’m sorry things turned out this way. It must be so hard for you...”

Torisha’s eyes overflowed with tears.

It didn’t take long for Torisha to trust her completely after that. Shihana was the only person she knew that she didn’t need to keep secrets from. There was nothing they couldn’t talk about; no conversation topic was off-limits. They talked at length about the suffering of the Tal people and the misguided reasons for it. They talked about history and philosophy and plans for the future.

One day as she sat and talked with Torisha, Shihana realized that Asra had the potential to drastically change Torisha’s future--and maybe the future of the Tal people in Rota.

“So...did you ever consider the idea that the legend of Rota’s founding might be mistaken in some way?” she asked. “I always heard that Rotarbal was subjugated under the rule of a cruel god, but I also think King Kiran had good reasons to want to change the story. Wasn’t sending the Tal people off into isolation and poverty the same kind of subjugation he was supposedly trying to end? The Tal Kumada are the ones who keep the Tal people oppressed with their teachings instead of searching for the truth. I find them contemptible and foolish.”

Torisha was utterly convinced by this conjecture Shihana made about Rota’s history--even more than Shihana expected her to be. From that day on, Torisha’s dream was to change the lot of her people by worshiping Talhamaya.

“I...I’ve had such a difficult life.” Torisha’s face was pale. “I had to leave the man I love forever because I was born Tal. My family rejected me and cast me out. Ever since then, I’ve done nothing but run and live in fear. When I finally found a husband and settled down with my family, my husband was killed by wolves.

“And now--I am ill. Gravely ill, I think. There’s a burning pain in my chest all the time. I don’t think I have much time to live.”

That was probably true. Torisha was unusually thin and looked sick.

“Asra is showing signs that she can sense the world of the gods, but I never want her to be one of the Ramau, ever. She would never be able to marry or have children. She’d be forced to live in seclusion with the Tal Kumada for the rest of her life... I can’t stand it. I don’t want her life to be like that.”

She sighed. Her eyes glittered with feverish light. “I’m a pebble that’s been crushed beneath the heel of my life. I don’t want my children to suffer the same way. When I think about what will happen to them after I die, I can’t sleep at night.” She faced Shihana squarely. “Are you really my friend? Even when I die, would you...”

She was shaking like a leaf. She seemed completely terrified, but also strangely determined. Shihana realized that now was her chance.

She values her daughter’s safety and freedom over her own life. If Asra gained the power of Talhamaya...

Torisha jumped at the idea. She ran away with it and took it places that Shihana hadn’t foreseen. Shihana compared her reaction to the idea of Asra becoming Sada Talhamaya to twigs and branches snapping back against her legs and face while traveling through the woods. Branches were weak on their own, but taken together and combined with Shihana’s own movements, those branches could cause damage.

When Shihana observed Torisha’s religious zeal for Talhamaya, she grasped how to make the Tal people her allies. The Ramau were especially easy to win over to her side due to their relative isolation from the rest of their people. They, too, were branches that snapped back when they were pushed through. Shihana became attuned to their

unique brand of dissatisfaction; they were discriminated against even among the Tal people. She learned ways to channel their dissatisfaction to turn certain situations to her advantage and build her own power.

She was sure that she could use the Tal people. She didn't want to lead Rota into a huge war; it didn't seem like anyone wanted that. Still, the Tal people could serve as reliable troops or backup forces for Prince Ihan. It was fortunate that he was partial to the Tal people, and that the Tal people knew it.

Just when Shihana felt that she'd reached a stalemate, she managed to backtrack and gain more allies that she'd overlooked before. After her conversation with Torisha, she took out her tarzu board and started placing pieces, creating a model of the scenario she currently faced. When she looked down at her game board, she realized something critically important.

Making Prince Ihan the King of Rota wouldn't be enough to change the country. She would have to change the hearts of the Rotan people as well. Rotans had benefited from their tyranny over the Tal people for hundreds of years. They believed in their nation's founding legend. No one questioned it. In order to change their minds, Shihana would have to flip that legend on its head.

If she could do that, her path to victory was clear. She could envision it. She could guide all the other pieces. But she didn't know how to change the legend of Sada Talhamaya and make everyone believe it. The Ramau did much to change the perception of Sada Talhamaya among their own people, but Shihana never figured out how to spread their version of the story to the rest of Rota in a convincing way.

She also didn't believe the Ramau when they told her that they'd seen the sacred river flowing from Noyuk into Rota again. She thought that Torisha probably had a fever dream inspired by her religious fervor. But when Ianu, one of the Ramau, showed Shihana proof that the sacred river was flowing again, goosebumps rose along her spine.

She'd made a mistake. That mistake locked her on to the path she'd prepared for herself. She was living through a cataclysmic historical

moment. Many events and conflicts were converging to form a great wave--and Shihana could direct where and how that wave would wash over Rota. She could achieve her goal. Rota would change. All of her plans were in place. All she had to do now was react, and wait.

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Shihana stared down at her hands. They'd gotten her this far. She was so excited that she was trembling slightly. Talhamaya was the last piece she needed to move. After Torisha and Asra violated the ancient Tal vow to never visit Sada Talhamaya's grave, Shihana devised a cruel and desperate plan. It wasn't her first choice, but she hoped it would be effective.

Instead of bringing in the Chamau as instructed, Shihana decided to wait and see if Sada Talhamaya's power would show itself somehow. She knew she would have to attack Torisha and Asra in some way in order to get the god's power to emerge, but she didn't need to risk herself simply to test the extent of Talhamaya's power. When she received news of the Shintadan massacre, she felt like all of her dreams were finally within reach.

Of course, there were always complications. Some of the complications she'd resolved over the past few months hadn't been foreseen and had been deeply irritating. But Shihana's flawless victory was close at hand. King Yosam was out of the country. She couldn't lose concentration for a moment. She had the keep her eyes on the goal and clear any obstacles in her path.

"Kafam, I want to see Prince Ihan," she said. "Are all the preparations made?"

Kafam nodded.

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A small bell rang to announce a messenger's arrival. Ihan's son Sahan lifted his head at the sound. Ihan was sitting in the castle's library, writing something at a desk. Sahan was playing near him;

sometimes Ihan looked up at him and frowned when he made too much noise.

A few minutes before, Ihan's wife and daughter had come for a visit to show off the beautiful new clothes they'd bought from traveling merchants that were in town for the founding ceremony. Sahan had decided to come with them out of curiosity, but his mother and sister hadn't lingered. He and his father were the only ones in the library now.

"Dad, the bell's ringing." Sahan suddenly frowned. He hated that bell. Whenever a messenger came to see his father, a servant came to take him out of the room.

Ihan stood up and picked up Sahan. "You'll understand the real meaning of that bell someday, Sahan," he said. "You're a prince, too."

Sahan ran his hands through Ihan's soft beard. A servant entered the room and took Sahan from Ihan's arms, then withdrew.

When Ihan was alone, he said, "Come in, Shihana."

Shihana didn't make a sound as she approached. He looked at her nervously and asked, "Did you find them?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," she said. She had to crane her neck to look up at Prince Ihan, who was much taller than her. His gaze was sharp and penetrating.

"Shihana, is Torisha's daughter really the Chamau?"

Shihana nodded.

Ihan believed her. When Shihana first came to him with her report, she'd told him the whole long story of how Torisha came to be executed. He'd gone to Shintadan and had her body exhumed to be sure, but now that he was, he didn't doubt anything that Shihana had said in her initial report. The cold had preserved Torisha's body for the most part; he still had nightmares about her bloodless face and hands.

"Your Majesty, that girl's power is real. She really can summon Talhamaya. While traveling here from New Yogo by way of Rakul province, she exterminated a huge wolf pack using the god's power. She saved a caravan." Shihana told Ihan about the herders she'd talked to

and the wolf corpses she'd examined. "The wolves were killed the same way the people at Shintadan were."

Ihan understood perfectly what that meant.

"Have you given further consideration to my proposal, Your Majesty?"

Ihan sucked in a huge breath, then let it out slowly as he looked down at Shihana. "Your proposal? You mean your intent to deliver Talhamaya's power into my hands? Power that is said to be worth the strength of two hundred thousand men in battle?"

Shihana nodded.

Prince Ihan's gaze was as sharp as swords. "Why would you come to me instead of my brother with such a proposal, Shihana? Are you telling me to usurp Yosam's place by force?"

Shihana snapped her mouth shut. Answering poorly here could mean her death. Ihan's contempt and suspicion radiated from him in waves.

Shihana stood up straight and looked him in the eye. "Do you really think I would ever suggest such a thing?" she asked quietly. Her voice shook. "All I want is one thing, and that is to maintain the peace that King Yosam has worked so hard to achieve. I've observed the southern clan lords preparing to rebel. They've heard that King Yosam's health is failing. I'm trying to prevent a disaster before it happens, Your Majesty."

Shihana paused. "It may be presumptuous of me to make such a proposal, but consider my position. I am one of the Kashal. That makes me knowledgeable about both Talhamaya and the crisis that Rota currently faces. If anything happens to King Yosam while he's abroad in Sangal, it will be too late for us to gather our allies here. That work must be done now. If you threaten the southern clan lords with Talhamaya's power, you would end their rebellion before it could even get started."

Shihana seemed to glow with an inner light. "'Why now?' you might ask. It's a fair question. I'll tell you; it's why I asked to meet with you tonight. The timing is perfect. The Hasal Ma Talhamaya is flowing in

Rota again after centuries. The daughter of the woman you loved has the power to summon Talhamaya. Doesn't all this seem a little too convenient? It's almost like the god planned things this way."

Ihan blinked like he'd just been slapped. "You are Kashal and you claim that Talhamaya had a hand in this? Even if that's true, why would you go along with it? Isn't cooperating with Talhamaya antithetical to who you are?"

Shihana nodded like she was accepting a challenge. "I believe that Talhamaya's potential to cause disaster can be transformed into a miracle that will save our nation." She spoke clearly and didn't stumble over her words. "The Chamau has appeared. She has the power to destroy Rota--or to save it. Are you saying that we should ignore her, or execute her to prevent another massacre like what happened at Shintadan?"

Ihan didn't answer.

Shihana spoke softly. "Please, just think about it. Asra is a twelve-year-old girl. She still listens to the adults around her. If you directed her and told her how to use her power..." Shihana trailed off. "If you did that, you could change Rota overnight, Your Majesty. You could suppress the resistance of the southern clan lords and make them pay their fair share of taxes. You could improve the lives of the Tal people. Your could wield Asra's power as a sword of justice to create a nation that not just peaceful, but thriving."

There was a long silence. Shihana held her breath.

Ihan's face showed his distress plainly. He was clearly tempted by Shihana's proposal, but he was also unsure about what would be the right thing to do. "I've wished for the power to do all of those things for a long time," he said. "I always thought that if I could only free myself from the burden of economic reliance on the southern clan lords, I could create real and lasting change.

"I want to keep Rota whole for Yosam's sake, but I can't do that and change the country at the same time." Ihan frowned. "Shihana, the people of Rota would want me to reject your proposal. It tramples our

nation's history and values underfoot as if they're meaningless. King Kiran killed Sada Talhamaya to create this kingdom. You can't expect me to cooperate with Sada Talhamaya reborn when King Kiran killed the original one because of her bloody, tyrannical oppression of her subjects."

Ihan put his face in his hands. "I'm sure that's what Yosam would say."

Shihana's face was calm and expressionless. None of what she was thinking was obvious on her face.

"But I still have to decide what to do about the children," Ihan said. He looked at Shihana with pain in his eyes. "I'll decide what to do regarding your proposal when my brother returns. I want to discuss it with him before I decide. In the meantime, I'll... I'll meet Torisha's children."

Shihana nodded. As she led Prince Ihan to the tent where Asra and Chikisa were staying, she made a mental note to tell Kafam about this conversation later.

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Asra and Chikisa heard a sudden commotion outside their tent. They found each other's hands reflexively and faced the tent's entrance.

The tent flap lifted, letting in cold fresh air from outside. A tall man that looked like a warrior entered the tent. His movements were as lithe and supple as a whip. He had high cheekbones and close-cropped black hair, which made him appear stern, but his eyes were kind.

The warrior stood next to the fire in the tent and stared at Asra and Chikisa.

Asra was so nervous that she couldn't breathe. *That's Prince Ihan! He and our mom were...*

Ihan didn't show it, but he was nervous as well. He was so surprised that he wasn't sure what to think. He could see Torisha in both of their faces, especially Asra's.

"Um... I don't know what to say," Ihan said hoarsely.

Chikisa and Asra said nothing as Ihan's expression of surprise changed to one of sadness. "I have no doubt that you're her children. You look just like her." Ihan came closer to Asra and Chikisa slowly, step by step. "I can't tell you how happy I am to finally meet you," he said quietly.

Chikisa and Asra looked at one another in confusion. They weren't sure what they should do or say. They looked blankly up at Ihan and didn't move.

"You have every right to hate me," Ihan said. "I hate myself. I made your mother suffer, and for that, I'm sorry." His voice was unsteady and whisper-quiet. "Torisha..." Ihan chanted a prayer for the dead. At the end of it, he said, "I'll do everything I can to make sure your children are happy. I swear it."

Chapter 4 - The Night Before the Celebration

“It’s so loud,” Tanda complained as he and Balsa crossed the drawbridge over Jitan’s moat. He fiddled with the fastenings of his new coat as he walked. It didn’t fit properly, so the cold air kept getting in.

Tomorrow was the twenty-second day of Shasam. Rota’s founding ceremony would be held in the afternoon. If the ceremony wasn’t so soon, the drawbridge over Jitan’s moat would have been up and the city’s gates would have been closed.

“Tanda, let’s walk over there.” Balsa leaned on Tanda’s shoulder and pointed to Jitan’s castle. Lots of curious people were milling about near the castle walls, hoping to catch a glimpse of what was happening inside.

“I don’t know. Don’t those holes in the ramparts look a little dangerous?”

There were holes high up on the castle walls where archers could shoot arrows from cover or pour hot liquid or tar onto the heads of any enemies below. If there were any archers up there, Balsa, Tanda and all the people on the drawbridge would be easy targets.

“They’re just murder holes,” Balsa said. “Take a look at how they’re angled. A lot of castles in Rota have them. They’re set up so archers can hit people while they’re on the bridge.”

“...Murder holes?”

Balsa shrugged dismissively.

The courtyard in front of Jitan’s castle was full of tents. The spears of warriors gleamed in the light of the sun. Flags of many colors were scattered around camp; each color represented a different clan.

Balsa sensed something moving above her and looked up. It was a hawk.

“Looks like Sufar found us,” Balsa muttered.

Tanda looked up and narrowed his eyes to slits so that he could track where the hawk was going. “Should we go see him?”

“I don’t see why not. We can always run away if he tries anything.”

Sufar suddenly appeared in the crowd in front of them. He walked toward them and nodded in greeting. “Tanda. Balsa.” His expression was difficult to interpret. “I’m surprised you can move so well,” he said to Balsa. “You must be incredibly strong.”

Balsa’s skin was still pale and slack from her recent injuries and illness, but her eyes burned with a strong will to live.

“Thank your apprentice for me,” Balsa said. “He saved my life.”

Sufar shook his head and passed his hand in front of his face. He was about to say something when he heard the high-pitched cries of many animals behind him. Tanda and Balsa tracked the sound to numerous cattle pens in the courtyard where sheep and pigs were being kept.

“Why are the animals upset?” Tanda asked.

Sufar shrugged. “They’re going to be sacrificed during the ceremony tomorrow. Every clan head brought ten of their own animals for that purpose.” Sufar looked out at the herds of sheep and the pig pens. “Their sacrifice represents King Kiran killing Sada Talhamaya to found our nation. They are offered up to the King of Rota; their meat is used to supplement the feast that follows the ceremony. They’ll be sacrificed in the exact spot where King Kiran killed Sada Talhamaya, on the Field of Freedom.”

Sufar pointed toward Rota’s Ritual Hall. “Do you see the low wall surrounding the Ritual Hall?” he asked,

“Yes,” Tanda said.

“The Field of Freedom is inside that wall,” Sufar said. “There is a large, round red stone that marks the spot. Prince Ihan will slaughter the pigs and sheep with his sword there. Ordinarily, King Yosam would do the honors, but he’s still in Sangal.”

Sufar shifted his gaze slightly upward. “Beyond the Ritual Hall is a line of low hills and a deep forest. You can see the border of the forest if

you squint. That's where Sada Talhamaya's grave lies. No one is allowed to go into the woods."

When Tanda looked at the forest above the Ritual Hall, he was surprised to see that there was no sign of snow at all. The trees were all lush and green even in the middle of winter.

Tanda's eyes widened. "I can... I can see the reflection of those trees in a river," he said. "There's a river in Nayugu." He could only see it very faintly from this distance. He chanted a spell Torogai had taught him to temporarily strengthen his ability to perceive the river.

As the river became crystal clear to him, Tanda took a few steps back and looked up with his mouth open in an O of shock. "There's a tree. I see it. Why is it so huge?"

Sufar looked at Tanda with shining eyes. "So you can see it, Tanda? It's easy to see why Torogai chose you as an apprentice. Even if I amplify my own perceptions of Noyuk, I can only sense the tree. I've never been able to see it."

Balsa looked where Tanda and Sufar were looking, but all she could see was an ordinary forest and an ordinary sky. She saw no sign of a huge tree at all.

"Jitan is the ancient capital of Rotarbal," Sufar said. "There is a water source inside that forest that connects to the sacred river that flows through Rota during Noyuk's spring. A large tree grows from the center of that water source. It's said to be so tall that no one can see the top of it. Sada Talhamaya climbed that tree and united with the god. People used to sacrifice animals to the god every single day in Rotarbal.

"I've heard it said that Sada Talhamaya's voice was difficult to understand. She always seemed like she was speaking from far away, like half of her was in our world and half of her was in Noyuk. Perhaps this was so because she built her palace in the same place as the tree.

"Most people can't see the tree at all, even if they're magic weavers. And I've never met anyone who can see the ruins of Sada Talhamaya's palace, so I don't know if that part of the legend is true or not."

Tanda and Sufar's intense focus on the forest and the scenery surrounding it made Balsa look a bit harder at the tree line. "Hey--isn't that smoke I see in the forest?"

Sufar faced Balsa. "People are camped there."

"Is that where you and the other Kashal are staying, Sufar?" Tanda asked. "Have you talked to Shihana?"

"I've talked to her and listened to her plan," Sufar said. "I also spoke with Prince Ihan last night."

Sufar sighed as he stared at the smoke rising from the Kashal camp. "Prince Ihan told me plainly that he has no interest in using Asra as a weapon. He's not the kind of man to lie, so I believe him." Sufar shifted his gaze to the walls of the courtyard surrounding the castle. "It seems that Prince Ihan has met with Asra and Chikisa. He's planning to talk to King Yosam about what will happen to them in the future. I guarantee that he's thinking primarily about their safety and future happiness."

Sufar looked at Balsa and frowned. "Prince Ihan is a man of deep feeling. He really does intend to do everything he can for those children. Shihana can't do anything that would harm them; not now. If she tries, Prince Ihan will oppose her."

There was a brief pause as Tanda and Balsa looked at Sufar. "Then...is that the end of it?" Tanda asked.

Sufar shrugged. "I think so. It seems like Asra doesn't want to become Sada Talhamaya, so King Yosam and Prince Ihan will decide what happens to her in the future. The main concern is to prevent her from being used to harm others. I don't see how Shihana could make her original plan work now."

"Where is Shihana?" Balsa asked.

"She's staying with other Kashal inside the castle."

"You mean she's free? You haven't caught her and told everyone what she did?"

Sufar's eyebrows went up. "She's...under surveillance."

Balsa glanced at Tanda.

“I talked to Prince Ihan at length about what Shihana’s punishment should be,” Sufar said. “She’s gone against the core values of the Kashal and shown disloyalty to the royal family. After the nation’s founding ceremony is over, the Kashal will convene a meeting of our elders and hold a trial.”

Sufar sighed. “Prince Ihan won’t use Asra’s power or go along with what Shihana had planned for her, so there’s no need to worry for now. We have bigger problems. The men camped here have been sharpening their weapons since they arrived. I expect there’ll be a battle before the end of the ceremony.”

Sufar looked completely exhausted.

“Sufar,” Balsa said, “you’ve been an enemy more often than you’ve been an ally, but I think that your essential nature is understandable enough. People show their true selves when they fight.”

Sufar’s eyes were dull and colorless. “I think it’s hard to truly understand someone, no matter the circumstances. People don’t always act the way we expect. I was sure that Shihana wouldn’t give up--and I never expected her to sully her hands with such a murderous plot in the first place. Still, it’s not like her to abandon her plans before she sees them to completion.”

Tanda agreed with Sufar; he knew Shihana. He doubted that she’d actually given up. He heard the sound of wings flapping above him and watched Shau land on Sufar’s shoulder.

“That’s why Shau and I are going to keep our eyes open,” Sufar said.

***

The night before Rota’s founding ceremony, Asra and Chikisa were given beds with mattresses and pillows to sleep on in their tents. Neither one of them had been so comfortable in a long time, but they were also too anxious to sleep. Shadows moved on the walls of their huge tent in the light of the fire.

“Asra,” Chikisa said, “I feel so much better about all this.”

“About what?”

“About what Prince Ihan said about you not becoming Sada Talhamaya. You don’t have to call the god to keep us safe ever again.”

Asra didn’t say anything for a while. She could hear the voices of people outside the tent drinking and celebrating together.

“You, Balsa and Prince Ihan are scared of the god,” she said. “You think she’s cruel and evil.”

“Well, yeah,” Chikisa said. “I told you what I thought about the god yesterday, and why mom thought she was so great.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Asra said. “How do I say it? If I weren’t the Chamau, the two of us wouldn’t be here right now.” She frowned. “Have you thought about that? If Talhamaya hadn’t saved us when we were going to be sold--and if I hadn’t called her to save me from the wolves--then neither of us would be here. We’d be dead. We owe our lives to Talhamaya, don’t we?”

Chikisa remained silent. Asra turned over on her bed and faced him squarely. “You call her cruel, but I think it’s people who are cruel. Don’t you remember all the people who laughed when mom was executed? And then some slave traders caught us! They were going to *sell* us, Chikisa!”

She paused. “I only called the god to save us from bad people when they attacked us. If I see someone in trouble in the future and the god could save them, what should I do? Should I ignore them and let them be killed?”

Asra appeared pained and deeply confused. Her burdens were too heavy for her to carry alone. She was thinking very seriously about the future and seeing a lot of awful possibilities. Chikisa felt sorry for her. She wasn’t wrong; choosing not to save someone when she had the power to do so was effectively the same thing as murder. And there were many cruel people in the world. There were probably people who would want Asra to save them.

“But you can’t save them, Asra,” he said. “It’s impossible. Killing people so freely and easily with the power of the god is just too much

for one person. No matter how good your intentions are, you'd still be killing some people to save others. I don't think a god like that, with a power like that, could truly save people. Talhamaya can't make the world a better place. All she does is kill people."

Asra could see an echo of Balsa's pain and sadness in Chikisa's eyes. She remembered Balsa saying, "I don't think you'd be happy living as god who kills people whenever she likes. I also don't think that a god like that could bring peace and happiness to the world. So let's make sure that doesn't happen. Your face during the wolf attack almost scared me to death."

Asra covered her face with her hands. She missed Balsa so much. She closed her eyes and tried to understand Balsa and Chikisa's perspective on the god. She had never once doubted her mother when she'd told her that Talhamaya was a just and merciful god. How was she even supposed to live without the god? She had no idea. The path before her was shrouded in darkness.

***

Ianu reflected on Shihana's orders with a little frown. Shihana had anticipated that Prince Ihan would refuse to use Sada Talhamaya's power, so she'd prepared a backup plan. It was Ianu's responsibility to execute that plan.

Shihana had worked quickly as soon as she'd received Prince Ihan's refusal. Before Shihana's father and the other Kashal arrived, Ianu, the other Tal people, Shihana, and her Kashal allies held a meeting. Shihana gave all of her Kashal allies orders to keep watch over different sections of Jitan. Some of these Kashal were double agents; Sufar didn't know they were working for Shihana. If they were stationed in the right places, Shihana might still be able to make her original plan succeed without Prince Ihan's cooperation.

Ianu was impressed with her foresight. *Shihana is amazing.*

Everything was progressing just as Shihana said it would. She was sure that Shihana would achieve her goal tomorrow at the nation's founding ceremony.

The chill of the winter evening was mitigated by the closeness of the sacred spring. The wind was almost warm. Ianu turned away from her campfire and looked up at the sacred forest. The trees shimmered with a faint light. She'd been born with the ability to see that light. She felt privileged to be alive at such a significant time in Rota's history. The Chamau lived.

Ianu's hatred for the Rotans who had killed her parents hadn't lessened in the years since their deaths. Her revenge would be creating a world where no Tal person could be indiscriminately cut down by Rotans ever again. She was ready to do her part to create that world.

"I have no regrets, Shihana," Ianu whispered. "Tomorrow, I will awaken Sada Talhamaya."

Chapter 5 - A Nation's Honor

It was the twenty-second day of Shasam. A bit of snow fell before daybreak, but the sun rose clear and bright, banishing all of the clouds in the sky. The nation's founding ceremony took place at noon, but Balsa and Tanda left the inn they were staying at before mid-morning. They dressed like Rotan merchants and wore full face coverings to conceal themselves from spying eyes.

The crowd surrounding the Ritual Hall was even thicker than it had been the day before. Balsa and Tanda gave up on pushing through the crowd and climbed over the low wall between the Ritual Hall and the Field of Freedom. From the top of the wall, Balsa saw people walking toward the Ritual Hall from the direction of the Shan forest.

Balsa didn't have a plan, but she knew she had to be at the Ritual Hall for the ceremony. She had the feeling that something terrible was about to happen. Balsa pointed to the people coming from the forest. She and Tanda jumped down from the wall and backtracked toward the Shan forest to investigate.

The camp just inside the forest had five tents, but no people were present. The fires had been banked.

"Asra and the others must be gone," Balsa whispered.

"Yeah. I don't see any of the Tal people or the Kashal, either," Tanda whispered back.

Balsa saw the shadows of people moving deeper inside the forest. They were gathered outside the main camp, using the trees for cover.

"We can't get any closer or they'll see us," Balsa whispered. "They can see everything from there because they're higher up."

Tanda craned his neck and looked back at the Ritual Hall. He saw red and gold flags marking the areas that had been set up to mark the assigned places of the most distinguished guests at today's ceremony.

There was a raised platform that faced the forest where Prince Ihan and his family would sit.

“A good archer might be able to hit someone from here,” he said.

Balsa shook her head. “Look there, and there.” She was pointing to the towers of the two gates that led into the Ritual Hall. Tanda squinted and could just barely make out longbowmen manning the gates from above.

“Hm. It’s good to see they’re prepared.”

The sound of a hunting horn echoed behind them. The bells hanging above each of the gates started ringing. The people surrounding the Ritual Hall fell silent and waited for the inner doors to open.

A warrior carrying the flag of the royal family of Rota emerged from the Ritual Hall ahead of Prince Ihan. When people caught sight of him, they cheered. Prince Ihan waved at the onlookers and calmly took his seat on the raised platform facing the Shan forest. His wife, son and daughter sat close to him on the same platform. Fireworks boomed high in the sky, signaling the start of the ceremony.

People from all over Rota had come to witness the nation’s founding ceremony. Artists and performers dedicated works and put on shows in honor of the event. Singers sang songs for the ceremony, accompanied by instruments and dancers. All of these performances and works praised King Kiran for slaying Sada Talhamaya and saving Rota from her barbarism. Balsa and Tanda quickly grew bored from the theme’s repetition.

“I don’t see any Tal people at the ceremony,” Tanda said.

Balsa barely glanced at the stage where the performances were taking place. She focused on the guards carrying spears and bows that were scattered through the crowd. She scanned the assembled people over and over again, but she saw no sign of Asra anywhere.

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“What do you mean, Shihana’s not here?” Sufar asked. This news reached him as the last of the performances onstage was wrapping up. “Find her! Track her and Asra from the Tal camp inside the forest.”

But when Sufar and his Kashal allies went to the tents where Shihana and Asra had last been seen, there was no sign of them anywhere. Sufar discovered several Kashal and guards that had been knocked out; they’d been concealed along the rear wall of the Ritual Hall. As he examined them more closely, he realized they’d been put to sleep by a magic weaver.

Sufar froze to the spot. “Find Shihana, now!” he called out. “I’ll search from the sky. All of you, keep tracking her from here.”

He created a soul connection with his hawk, Shau, and flew high above the Ritual Hall. There weren’t enough Kashal here to discreetly search the crowd without disrupting the ceremony. Shihana knew too many secret ways that connected the Ritual Hall to the castle or the forest. Sufar’s urgency and impatience spurred him on as he surveyed the scene below him.

***

Asra and Chikisa were in a low tunnel near the Ritual Hall. Neither Sufar nor Balsa had any hope of finding them there.

“These sets are special,” Shihana said. “No one can see you from here.” Her voice echoed in the narrow tunnel. This tunnel had been built inside the gap between the interior and exterior walls surrounding the Ritual Hall. There were small holes for ventilation; Shihana, Chikisa and Asra could clearly see the stage in front of the Ritual Hall through the holes.

“Prince Ihan wanted you to be able to watch the ceremony, but he didn’t want you to be seen,” Shihana said. “That’s why I brought you here.”

There were a lot of tunnels and passages like this that were known to only a handful of the Kashal. Shihana had explained a bit about them as she’d led Asra and Chikisa underground.

Asra and Chikisa gathered around the tiny holes and watched the performances on the stage. They could clearly hear the music and the words of each of the dramatic performances. At first, Asra and Chikisa were fascinated by the spectacle; they'd never seen anything like it. But as time passed, they understood what the ceremony was actually about and looked at one another with grim frowns. All those people out there were celebrating the oppression of the Tal people.

Asra's face felt hot. "They're so mean!"

Chikisa nodded. "I didn't know that Rota's founding ceremony was like this."

Shihana put her hand on Chikisa's shoulder and whispered, "It's like this every year. That's why the Rotans are so full of themselves and why

they hate Sada Talhamaya so much. It's also why they're happy to let the Tal people suffer. They don't think of you as people at all. They don't realize that any of this is cruel or ugly. But looking at it from the outside, it's obvious, isn't it?"

The performance on the stage ended. A hush fell over the courtyard. Asra and Chikisa flinched when they heard someone scream.

"It's all right," Shihana said. "That's a pig, not a person. A lot of pigs and sheep are sacrificed during this ceremony. Can you see them being led up to the stage?"

Prince Ihan addressed the assembled guests and offered them generic words of thanks. Then he picked up a sharp sword and walked to the middle of the stage. He stopped directly in front of a snow-white sheep and said, "Goddess Afal! Moher of everything that lives! We humbly ask for your continued blessings. As gratitude for your beneficence, we offer up these animals."

Prince Ihan's sword flashed and sliced down. Asra shut her eyes so that she wouldn't have to watch what happened next. The sheep made no sound as it died.

The crowd applauded Prince Ihan. A young servant led another sheep to the stage to be sacrificed; this one was a large brown shahan sheep.

"Goddess Afal!" Prince Ihan called out. "Gods of Noyuk! We offer reverence to you. Long ago, the evil child of the goddess crossed into our world. To ensure that never happens again, we ask that you--"

"Talhamaya isn't evil!" a woman shouted.

Ihan started in surprise at the interruption and turned around. His eyes scanned the crowd, searching for who had spoken. He pointed to a Tal woman in a hood.

"Ianu!" Asra gasped. She put her hands over her mouth.

There was a fierce light in Ianu's eyes. She squared her shoulders and stood up straight; she was ready to fight. "Talhamaya is a great and powerful god," Ianu said. "The sacred river flows into our world and

bestows the blessings of the other gods upon us only because of her. All of Rota should know of her benevolence! All of your fields and forests are enriched because of Talhamaya!

"And that's not all," Ianu went on. "A Tal person has appeared who can invite the god back into our world. She will become Sada Talhamaya reborn and guide this nation in the right direction!"

Ianu looked directly at Asra as if she knew exactly where she was. Her words pierced Asra's heart.

"Sada Talhamaya! Free us! We've suffered for so long! I beg you, punish the Rotan people for keeping us in the shadows and trampling on our rights! Punish them as you did the men and women at Shintadan!"

Ianu extended both hands to the sky. Other Tal people in the crowd began chanting, "Sada Talhamaya! Sada Talhamaya! Free us! Free us!"

Asra shook from head to toe. Ianu's eyes were like her mother's.

The courtyard erupted into chaos like a hive of bees bursting open. Guards and soldiers came running and seized Ianu's arms. Asra saw one of the guards strike the side of her head. Ianu collapsed, unconscious, to the ground.

Asra screamed.

Prince Ihan called for order. "Silence!" He crashed his sword against the shield of one of his guards. The people in the courtyard quieted down. Prince Ihan ordered his guards to take Ianu to prison.

One of the men in the crowd shouted loudly, "Is that all you intend to do with her, Your Majesty? She called for Rota's destruction! She worships Talhamaya! You must kill her to protect us all!"

It was only one man, but others called out their agreement with him. The southern clan lords stood up from their seats. "He's right, Your Majesty," lord Aman said. "You must consider that woman's punishment very carefully. And not just her--the Tal people in the crowd supported her as well. How do you intend to judge them all?"

Aman rubbed his hand against his fat cheek. “They’ve brought a curse upon us and ruined the ceremony. You must purify this place immediately, Prince Ihan!”

Other lords lifted up their voices to agree with lord Aman. “It is the role of Rota’s royal family to protect Rota’s citizens from the threat of Sada Talhamaya,” lord Suan said. “You must slay that woman in that sheep’s place in order to purify the Ritual Hall.”

Asra wrung her hands. They wanted to kill Ianu!

“Wait, lord Aman,” Prince Ihan said in a voice that carried. “Are you suggesting that I should execute this woman without a trial? The gods would be ashamed at such brutality. The Rotan people are not murderers.”

“We all know that you have your own special reasons for protecting the Tal people, Your Majesty,” lord Aman said in a mocking tone.

Ihan’s face went beet red. “Lord Aman, you insult me!”

“Not at all, Your Majesty. I’m only saying what everyone knows to be the truth. You know it yourself. Didn’t you dig up the body of a Tal woman who was executed at Shintadan because you couldn’t bear to give her up?”

There were shouts of consternation from the crowd.

“That woman desires to bring the bloodthirsty god Talhamaya into our world. Does she have some connection to the woman you removed from her grave? Maybe they’re the same woman, and she’s been animated by an evil spirit or god?”

The voices of the people in the courtyard crashed over Prince Ihan like a wave.

Most of the northern clan lords stood up. “It’s a trick, Your Majesty,” lord Rahan shouted. “This is just a trap that the southern clan lords have devised. They must have planted that woman and those other Tal people in the crowd. Don’t believe it!”

The guards standing around the northern clan lords readied their weapons. The bodyguards of the southern clan lords prepared to fight

them.

“Peace!” Prince Ihan shouted. “Warriors of Rota, peace! Do you intend to spill blood at such a sacred ceremony?”

The warriors on the northern and southern sides of the conflict glared at one another, but made no move to attack.

Lord Rahan addressed Prince Ihan. “Your Majesty, you must execute that Tal woman. Please! Show us all that your personal feelings will not interfere with maintaining peace in Rota. Demonstrate your wisdom and put an end to all this mess!”

Asra’s eyes locked on Prince Ihan’s face. He was frowning deeply. A chill went up her spine. *He’s not telling them “no.” Ianu will be killed.*

As her eyes rested on the man who had first called for Ianu’’s death, Asra’s fear turned to rage. She spun away from her brother and broke into a run.

Chapter 6 - Accepting the God

"Asra!" Chikisa called out as he chased after her. He saw Shihana running behind him out of the corner of his eye.

Asra sprinted down the dark tunnel, running faster than she ever had in her life. She had to get to the sacred spring before Ianu was killed.

Chikisa kept chasing her but never managed to catch up. Asra reached the mouth of the tunnel and dashed into the light with Chikisa right behind her. Someone yanked his shoulder roughly from behind.

"Let me go! Asra's going to--"

The person who'd grabbed his arm was one of the Kashal. He shook his head and tightened his grip on Chikisa's arm.

One of the Tal people was standing behind the Kashal man; he leaned in close to Chikisa and whispered, "The time for the Chamau to become Sada Talhamaya has come. No one must interfere, not even her own brother."

Chikisa flushed with rage. Shihana approached him at a leisurely pace and said with a smile, "Everything's going exactly to plan. Why else do you think I brought you both here, Chikisa?"

Chikisa opened his mouth to scream, but Shihana covered it with her hand. When Chikisa tried to bite her hand, the Kashal man gripping his arm punched him in the gut. Chikisa doubled over and struggled to breathe. "Asra…"

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Asra had no idea what was happening behind her. She climbed the low foothills that led into the Shan forest as fast as she could. *I have to make it before they kill Ianu!* That was all she could think about. She tried to encourage herself: *I* **have** *to make it. If I don't, she'll die!*

Warm water from the sacred river flowed around her. The spring was close; she could see the tree. Asra sprinted the remaining distance and jumped into the spring with a terrific splash. Her entire body felt buoyant as she approached the tree. She gripped the tree's trunk with both hands, kicked up her feet and began to climb.

Energy and strength radiated from the tree into her. The smell of the pikuya moss growing on its trunk hung so thickly in the air that it hurt to breathe. The ring of sacred mistletoe around Asra's neck glowed with a silvery light. The smell of blood emanating from it was strong enough to overpower the scent of the moss.

Asra's surroundings changed as she climbed. The ruins of an abandoned palace were clearly visible just a little bit above her. She could still see the forest below her, but the ruins were at the forefront of her vision. When she reached a recess in the tree's trunk that was wide and level like a bench, she stopped for a brief rest. The sound of the sacred spring flowing from Noyuk was all around her. This tree was Noyuk's heart, pumping water out into the world instead of blood.

This tree and the sacred river are connected, Asra thought. *No: they're the same!*

Asra felt her own body melting into the tree. It was a strange feeling. She could suddenly hear everything that was going on around the Ritual Hall perfectly, despite the distance between the Ritual Hall and the tree. It was like the water of the sacred spring carried exact echoes of everything that people were saying to her ears.

"You must kill the woman who called on the bloodthirsty god of the Tal people," a man said. "She's as terrifying as the god she claims to worship. She's an ill omen, Your Majesty."

"The only terrifying person here is you," Asra said. "Look at yourself! You're calling for someone's murder! Which of you is worse?"

Everyone surrounding the Ritual Hall fell silent and looked around, searching for the owner of the mysterious voice they'd just heard.

They can hear me! Asra smiled. Power flowed and crested within her just like the time she'd called on Talhamaya to kill the wolves. Asra took

a deep breath and cried out, “People of Rota, listen to me! Anyone who wishes death on someone else is evil! Ignoring the pain and suffering you have caused the Tal people is also evil. If you call for the deaths of the Tal people, I’ll call for your deaths, too!”

Asra’s body was sucked into the tree trunk behind her. She spun around as if she was caught in a whirlpool. Talhamaya showed her fangs and slipped through the ring of sacred mistletoe around Asra’s neck. At that moment, Asra was split in half: half of herself sat in the tree while the other half accompanied Talhamaya as she flew toward the Ritual Hall.

The Ritual Hall and the celebration guests were clearly visible below her. Talhamaya broke through the outer and inner walls of the Ritual Hall with a flick of her fangs, leaving a trail of dust in her wake. She descended to the ground and passed through the crowd of stunned, silent people. To most people, she looked like a beam of light passing gracefully through the air. The dust that fell from the broken walls surrounding the Ritual Hall was hot to the touch.

As the Rotan people surrounding her shook and cried out and screamed in fear, Asra began to laugh. She laughed so hard and so much and she couldn’t stop. Talhamaya wanted blood. The blood of the sheep that Prince Ihan had sacrificed made Talhamaya’s thirst urgent and irresistible.

The part of Asra that remained sitting in the sacred tree was illumined in a corona of red light. The blue moss on the tree glowed around her and brightened her red aura. The silvery ring around her neck shone brightly in the light of the moss.

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“She’s up there, in that huge tree!” Tanda shouted. “Can you see her?”

Balsa narrowed her eyes and looked up at the trees, but she couldn’t see Asra at all.

“Not there,” Tanda said. “Higher up!”

Balsa looked up at the sky and saw Asra sitting in midair. “Huh?”

Asra was surrounded in soft red light. Her laughter cut through the air and echoed around Balsa and Tanda. The laugh was the same one Balsa remembered hearing when Asra had killed the wolves.

A chill went up Balsa's spine. She gritted her teeth as she remembered how the god had lingered over the corpses of the wolves to drink their blood. It was only a matter of time before the god killed people to slake her bloodlust. Asra was drunk on power and far removed from everything happening around her; she wouldn't intervene at all when Talhamaya started killing people.

Balsa broke into a run.

"Balsa!" Tanda called after her. Balsa removed her coat as she ran and jumped over the low wall surrounding the Ritual Hall. Tanda followed, shedding his own hood and coat as he ran. He closed his eyes tight and jumped over the wall, landing unharmed on the other side. Tanda shifted his feet and ran after Balsa. When they reached the empty tents where the Kashal had camped the night before, they found a path that led into the low foothills near the edge of the Shan forest.

***

Asra felt amazing. She never wanted to stop laughing. She never knew that blood could smell so good. The soft necks of the people she passed seemed especially appealing. All she needed to do was touch them a little bit to get their blood flowing. But she didn't touch anyone. Her other half was still holding her back.

"You can't kill them," she told herself.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's not right to kill people." The part of Asra sitting in the tree wasn't swayed by Talhamaya's power or perspective; she could hear the screams of the terrified people standing around the Ritual Hall.

"But I want blood," her Talhamaya-controlled half whined.

Her desire for blood was rapidly increasing. She could see the silvery ring glowing brighter and brighter around her neck. She was so thirsty that her throat burned, but she didn't want water; water wouldn't help. She experienced the true bliss of being Talhamaya and the god's unquenchable thirst at the same time. She swam through the air with Talhamaya, passing by many people until she faced Prince Ihan directly.

Prince Ihan was sweating. He could see Talhamaya as a beam of light in front of him, but he stood completely still. Asra recognized him, but she didn't feel anything about him at all. She neither liked nor hated him. Guards carrying swords and spears gathered around him in an effort to protect him, but Asra thought their bodies and even their weapons were too weak and soft to make a shield strong enough to deflect her attacks. Human bodies were basically just bags full of blood.

"You can't kill them!" The part of Asra that sat in the sacred tree was crying. She was trying with all her might to hold Talhamaya back. "I don't want to kill people!"

But Talhamaya desired blood--and her desire could not be denied or repressed any longer.

***

Balsa noticed a few people standing under the trees near the edge of the forest. There were four of them; two men were restraining a boy while a woman stood behind them, watching.

"Chikisa!" Balsa called out. She waved her spear over her head in warning; its blade was still sheathed. She socked the first man holding Chikisa in the gut with the butt of her spear, then shifted her grip and executed the same move on the other man. Both fell instantly to the ground.

Balsa looked up at the woman and immediately recognized Shihana.

"Archers!" Shihana yelled.

Arrows fell around Balsa like rain. She deflected all the arrows that came near her and Chikisa, but the archers fired quickly and didn't give her any time to do anything but defend. She turned around and spotted one of the archers nearby. Balsa bent forward at the hip and threw her spear at the archer like a javelin. The spear's point cut through the archer's bowstring before embedding itself in the trunk of the tree behind him.

Balsa felt a warm breeze pass by her ear. She flinched away and ducked just in time to avoid a swipe from Shihana's short sword.

Shihana's smile was piercingly cold. She lunged toward Balsa with incredible speed and precision. The tip of her sword grazed Balsa's stomach; the wound was slight, but it burned like fire. Shihana was a master of her weapon and clearly trained to kill. Her sword was sharp enough to cut through layers of leather armor with ease. She wasn't an opponent that Balsa could win against without her spear. She wasn't about to gain the power to cut Shihana through sheer willpower; she needed a weapon.

Shihana kept smiling and slashing at Balsa in unnerving silence.

"Balsa!" Tanda called out to her from behind a tree.

"I'm fine; take care of Chikisa!" she shouted to him. Shihana slashed at her face; she felt blood dripping down her cheek. "Bring Chikisa to Asra!"

Balsa threw caution to the wind, looked Shihana directly in the eyes, and punched her in the face with her left fist.

Shihana was surprised enough to take a large step back. During her brief moment of distraction, Balsa kicked her sword out of her hand, sending it flying into the surrounding trees. Shihana crouched down and shot her leg out to trip Balsa.

Balsa fell hard on her back. Her newly stitched wounds screamed agony at her as she jumped up and kicked Shihana hard behind her knees.

Shihana collapsed to the ground with a grunt. Balsa pinned her down face-up with her right arm across her arms and chest to hold her in place and punched her in the face with her free hand.

Shihana twisted and writhed and tried to shake her off, but Balsa stayed put and continued attacking. She muttered something in a low voice; that was all the warning Balsa got before a dagger appeared in Shihana's hand. Shihana threw the dagger at Balsa's head; Balsa dodged narrowly, but she was forced to let go of Shihana.

Shihana got to her feet and stood above Balsa on a low hill. Balsa faced her silently and didn't move.

***

“Chikisa, are you all right?” Tanda asked. He’d been punched or kicked in the stomach and couldn’t walk well. There were tears in his eyes.

“We have to stop Asra,” Chikisa choked out.

Tanda nodded and supported Chikisa as they half-ran, half-staggered toward the huge tree growing from the sacred spring. There were Tal people and other Kashal in the woods with them, so they didn’t make it very far before they were completely surrounded.

Tanda knelt down on the ground and picked up a handful of grass. “Master Torogai, please protect us,” he muttered under his breath. He glanced at Chikisa. “I hope this works.”

He ripped the grass in his hand out of the ground by the roots, then rubbed the grass between his palms as he chanted the words of a spell. When the spell was complete, Tanda took a deep breath and blew the grass in his hands away. It went flying in all directions--but it wasn’t grass anymore.

This particular spell turned grass into needles.

The men surrounding Tanda and Chikisa were assailed by clusters of razor-sharp needles cutting through their hands and faces. Tanda took Chikisa by the hand and slipped past the injured men surrounding them. His heart pounded wildly; he wasn’t used to seeing so many people in pain over something he’d done. He felt his heart in his throat; it felt like it was trying to escape through his mouth.

Tanda uttered the same spell he’d used the day before to bring the sacred tree into sharper focus. “Chikisa, can you see that tree?” he asked.

Chikisa shook his head and gasped, “What tree? I don’t see--”

“It’s there!” Tanda pointed.

Chikisa looked where Tanda was pointing and called out, “Asra!” She looked like she was sitting down in midair far above him and Tanda.

She was surrounded by a corona of red light. She was laughing so hard that it seemed like she'd gone insane.

"Asra!" A chill went up Chikisa's spine. He recognized his sister's voice, but there was no kindness or softness in it.

"Try to touch the tree," Tanda said. "Can you feel it?"

Tanda seemed to be touching nothing but air. When Chikisa placed his hands near Tanda's, he felt something warm. There was definitely something there. Chikisa looked up at Tanda and asked, "We have to climb it, right?"

Tanda nodded.

Chikisa took a deep breath and set his jaw. He was shaking all over. Asra had already united with Talhamaya. Even if he climbed the tree and reached her, it was probably too late for him to do anything. She would do whatever the god wanted from now on.

"I'll climb ahead of you and guide you," Tanda said. "Let's go."

Tanda climbed up the tree with surprising speed. Chikisa had to rush to keep pace with him. He was afraid that he'd miss his footing or handholds and fall. Climbing an ordinary tree this tall was dangerous on his own; climbing it without being able to see it seemed fatally risky. Chikisa's fear mounted as he climbed; he started crying without realizing it sometime during the ascent.

"Hang in there, Chikisa," Tanda said. "We'll reach Asra soon, I promise. Talhamaya hasn't completely consumed her yet."

Chikisa made no effort to suppress his tears, but he forced himself to hurry. Asra's laughter was getting louder. It was so frightening that he wanted to cover his ears, but he couldn't do that; he'd fall.

When Asra came into view above him, her laughter suddenly ceased. She looked down at him with strangely glowing eyes. Her expression was hungry and determined, like she'd just caught an animal in a trap and was preparing to pounce. Chikisa felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of cold water over his head. When Asra's breath touched his face, all he could feel was the knife-sharp, bone-chilling cold of the god's fangs.

***

Shihana pulled another dagger from her clothes and closed the distance between her and Balsa. Balsa evaded Shihana's knife cuts, but she couldn't step aside fast enough to avoid the sword of the Kashal man standing behind her. Her cut her back open with one long slash.

Balsa fell to the ground. Her entire body felt like it was on fire. The new cut reopened her previous wound; she felt blood soaking through her clothes.

"I'm fine here," Shihana said to the Kashal man. "Go after Chikisa. You can't let him reach Asra."

Balsa kicked herself off the ground and leaped at Shihana. Shihana slit open Balsa's neck with her dagger. Blood gushed everywhere, but Balsa couldn't retreat. She shoved two fingers into Shihana's right eye and ripped it out.

Shihana screamed. Balsa kneed Shihana in the gut and turned away. She couldn't spare the time to check if Shihana was unconscious or not; she needed to reach the archer that was targeting Tanda and Chikisa.

The archer nocked his arrow and aimed. He fired at the same instant that Balsa attacked him from behind.

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Tanda heard an arrow whizzing through the air and looked over his shoulder. Chikisa screamed as the arrow embedded itself in his shoulder. "Chikisa!" Chikisa's body twisted in pain; he lost his grip on the tree.

Tanda reached out to catch Chikisa before he fell. He grabbed onto Chikisa's shirt, but he was so heavy that Tanda nearly fell himself. When Chikisa tried to find the tree again, his hands passed through it like it wasn't there.

“I can’t find the tree!”

Asra’s cold eyes passed over Chikisa as he struggled to reach her.

***

Something interrupted Asra’s blissful joy. They were eyes--her brother’s eyes. She could see them. Chikisa was looking up at her, clearly in pain. Something of Asra’s true self swirled like a vortex within her bubble of comfort and safety. She remembered Chikisa; she could hear his voice inside her mind, but also in the immediate present: he was calling out to her. His eyes were so sad.

Someone else was below her, too--someone else with sad eyes. Was that--Balsa?

All of Asra's memories returned to her in a flash of light. She remembered everything: her life with her parents and Chikisa, the time she'd spent with Balsa and the caravan, and her time traveling with Shihana and Ianu.

The moment her memories returned, the smell of blood all around her became nauseating instead of appetizing. She could hear people's screams and see their fear clearly for the first time. Her eyes passed over Prince Ihan and the Rotans surrounding him until they settled on the fat face of one of the southern clan lords.

The lord trembled and broke into a cold sweat when he felt her eyes upon him. His life was in her hands. She wanted to slit his throat and drink his blood.

But then, Asra's memories beat that desire back. *I...I'm thinking about killing someone! But I don't want to kill anyone!*

She saw Talhamaya's face reflected in the eyes of the southern clan lord. She'd never seen it before. It was terrifying.

Asra suddenly heard Balsa's voice in her hears: "Your face during the wolf attack almost scared me to death." Had Balsa seen this? Had she seen the god like this?

Asra understood what she'd just been doing: she'd been chasing people around to scare them before she killed them. She screamed and yanked at the glowing ring around her neck to restrain herself from killing the man in front of her.

"I don't want to kill anyone!"

Talhamaya's body shuddered from anger and irritation. "*I* want to kill them, you little brat! Don't get in my way!" She twisted her neck around and stared at the part of Asra that was still sitting in the sacred tree. "If you keep holding me back, I'll make you disappear."

Asra felt Talhamaya devouring her heart. If she consumed it all, Talhamaya and Asra would be permanently connected. She'd become Sada Talhamaya.

“No! I don’t want to be Sada Talhamaya!” Her defiance was like a shaft of light cutting through dark clouds. “I *won’t* be Sada Talhamaya!”

Asra gripped the ring of sacred mistletoe around her neck with both hands. *This is the gate Sada Talhamaya uses to enter our world*, she thought. *If I can consume her instead, I might be able to seal her away.*

The ring around her neck was solidly attached to her and wouldn’t budge. She might die trying to remove it, but Asra didn’t hesitate. The faces of all the people she knew resurfaced from her memories and gave her strength.

Talhamaya’s fangs were pointed directly at her. She shook all over, but kept pulling at the ring around her neck with both hands. The god’s face

was vivid and terrible; it loomed large in front of her as Talhamaya came closer.

Asra's eyes met Talhamaya's. The moment felt sharp and bright enough to be preserved in glass. Talhamaya's fangs were huge; her mouth was big enough to swallow Asra whole. Asra kept her eyes open and felt the power of the sacred river flowing within her. She slipped the ring of sacred mistletoe off her neck with a soft cry, then exercised her power to absorb the god into herself.

Absorbing the god was intensely painful. Asra used the last of her strength to fling the ring of sacred mistletoe away from her. That done, she went limp against the trunk of the sacred tree.

***

Asra fell like a ripe apple toward the ground. Tanda caught her in one arm as she fell and hugged her to his chest. His grip on the tree with his legs slipped due to the increase in weight. He righted himself and tightened his grip on the tree, Chikisa, and Asra.

Tanda looked down at the tops of the trees below him. They tree he was climbing was much taller than the surrounding forest. He couldn't get down while supporting Chikisa and Asra, so he made the decision to let go of the tree and fall toward a thick clump of tall trees below. With any luck, he, Chikisa and Asra would get caught in the limbs of those tall trees, breaking their fall.

Tanda fell with his back to the ground and Asra clutched to his chest to protect her. He kept his grip on Chikisa's clothes as he felt branches tear

at his own clothes and skin. Shock and impact made his head feel like the inside of a drum. Tand could do nothing except pray that they would all survive the fall.

***

Balsa knocked out the archer that shot Chikisa, then dashed toward Tanda. She could see him and Chikisa hanging in midair. She watched as Tanda caught a smaller figure--Asra--and started falling from the sky. Asra's neck was red with blood.

Balsa saw two huge fangs cut through the air and create a platform under Asra; the crescent shape of the fangs made the movement look a little like an embrace. It was possible that this slowed Tanda, Chikisa, and Asra's descent, but Balsa couldn't tell by how much.

The three of them crashed into the trees above Balsa's head. The main tree they landed in was young and not strong enough to support all three of them; it let out a creak like a scream as its branches snapped and the main trunk crashed into another tree.

Balsa rushed desperately toward the fallen tree. Tanda and the others were entangled in the branches of the fallen tree and the one it had crashed into. Balsa faced the stronger tree and started to climb; the fallen tree couldn't possibly hold any more weight. When she reached the same height level as Tanda, Chikisa and Asra, she realized that she wouldn't be able to lower them to the ground without help.

"Balsa! Can you hear me? We're here!" Sufar called out below her. He climbed partway up the tree she was in and started hacking at the broken branches of the fallen tree to create a clear path to Tanda and the others. Mark was on the ground, waiting for Sufar's orders.

With Sufar's help, Balsa was able to extricate Chikisa from the tangled branches of the trees and lay him out gently on the ground. Asra came next. The two of them were unconscious, but none of the injuries they'd sustained seemed life-threatening.

Lifting Tanda from the tangled branches was difficult. When he was finally laid out on the ground next to the children, the first thing Balsa noticed was the severity of his wounds. He was cut and bruised all over, just like she was. Mark and Sufar were also injured from fighting Shihana's allies. Balsa glanced around and realized that they were all in pretty rotten shape.

Tanda was still able to move, so Balsa crouched down next to Chikisa and Asra. She extended a hand to each of their necks and waited. They both had a pulse. They were still alive.

Balsa pulled Asra to her chest with trembling hands. She hugged her with all her remaining strength and let out a low groan.

Epilogue - Field of Sarayu Flowers

Balsa slept for a long time. Sometimes she heard voices or saw dim light beneath her eyelids, but she was too exhausted to open her eyes. She couldn't be sure that anything she saw or heard wasn't a dream.

She finally awoke when she heard the voice of an unfamiliar man standing over her. Her eyes snapped open. She tried to sit up, but the whole room was spinning. Balsa closed her eyes again and focused on her breathing.

"I think she's awake," a man said.

Balsa opened her eyes again, more slowly this time, and saw two men that she didn't know.

"Can you hear me?" the man standing closest to her asked. "You're doing a lot better. We're healers, the two of us; we've been treating you. I'm glad to see you're awake, but you should still rest."

"The...others?" Balsa asked. Her tongue and throat were so dry that it was difficult to speak.

"The other three people who were brought in with you are still alive," the healer said. "Go back to sleep."

Balsa felt the tension drain out of her as she processed what the healer had said. She was asleep again the moment she closed her eyes.

***

When Balsa woke up again, she heard someone whispering next to her bed. The room around her was dim; all she could really make out was the indistinct figure of Tanda laid out in the bed next to hers. A fire was lit in the center of the room; without it, she wouldn't be able to see anything at all.

Balsa squinted and just made out the shadow of a man on the other side of the room. He was sitting in a low, Rotan-style chair with his back to her. When he shifted a little in his seat, Balsa caught a glimpse of Asra's pale white face. She was in the bed in front of the man.

The man reached out and touched Asra's hair with jerky, awkward movements. "Why?" he whispered. "Why didn't you kill us? I was sure that you hated us--hated *me* for making your mother suffer so much..."

Balsa frowned as she guessed who the man was: Prince Ihan. Who else would ask questions like that? It wasn't clear if the questions he was asking were more for Asra or himself.

Balsa closed her eyes and listened.

"I loved your mother more than anything, but I gave her up for the safety and stability of the kingdom. Your mother must have understood what a marriage between us would cost. That's why she ran away." Ihan let out a long breath. "I expected you to judge me harshly. If only I'd ignored everyone's objections and married her anyway...but, no. If I'd done that, you and your brother would never have been born. Any children we might have had would have been killed at birth to prevent them from entering the line of succession. I probably wouldn't be able to stop that from happening, no matter how hard I tried."

Ihan sank into silence. There was no sound in the tent except the wind. Ihan looked down at the bandages covering Asra's neck and chest. "Is that where the ring of sacred mistletoe came off? I can only imagine how much that must have hurt. You were willing to give up your own life to seal the god away."

Balsa sucked in a breath and shifted slightly on her bed. Ihan turned around and looked at her. "Are you awake?"

"How is Asra?" Balsa whispered hoarsely.

Ihan frowned. "She's alive. But Sufar said that he can't feel her soul inside her anymore." His voice shook. "She's too young to have been forced into such a choice. It's not fair."

Balsa closed her eyes again and fell once more into the darkness.

***

Balsa, Tanda and Chikisa gradually improved over the next few days. The tent where they were being treated was just outside Rota's Ritual Hall. The worst of the cold northern winter was past; it would soon be spring.

Sufar came by to check on Balsa and Tanda sometimes and give them news. King Yosam returned safely from Sangal and heard about the attempted insurrection of the southern clan lords from Prince Ihan. Ianu's ultimate punishment likely wouldn't be decided for months.

Sufar's wrinkles were obviously deeper and more pronounced than when Balsa had first met him. He always appeared exhausted during his visits. When Sufar finally took his leave to return to his home village among the Kashal, Tanda said, "I'm sure what happened with Shihana had a profound effect on him. I hope he finds her soon."

After causing such a commotion on the day of the founding ceremony, Shihana and her closest allies vanished without a trace. Other Kashal were tracking them, but no one knew where they'd gone yet.

"I know he can't just let Shihana be," Tanda said. "Many of the Kashal see him as their leader. Shihana rebelled against the royal family and incited the Tal people, so I'm sure her punishment won't be a light one. I wonder if Sufar will ever recover. Killing Shihana would be like ripping the scab from a wound--it won't make any of Rota's problems go away; it'll just bring them closer to the surface."

Tanda had traveled with Sufar for a long time, hiding and discovering Rota's secrets. He couldn't seen a path forward where Rota could remain at peace. The problems were too fundamental and too difficult to solve easily.

"The southern clan lords and their hostility aren't going anywhere. Neither is Shihana. I'm sure she'll find a way to elude Sufar just long enough to rescue Prince Ihan from some danger or crisis and stage a triumphant return. What do you think, Balsa?"

Balsa secured her spear to the fastenings on her leather belt. She didn't look up as she said, "You're probably right."

A little while later, Balsa finished securing her spear and looked over at Chikisa. He was standing next to Asra's bed.

"Chikisa," Balsa said, "do you have a second?"

Chikisa lifted his head and turned toward Balsa. Balsa held out a large leather belt full of pouches to him.

"Is this for me?"

"Yep. When we finally get going, it'll be a long trip, so I'll be counting on you to gather lots to help feed us all."

Chikisa nodded, but he was frowning slightly.

"I also got some traveling clothes for you," she said, placing a bundle of folded clothes on her bed.

Chikisa fastened the slightly complicated belt around his waist. When he was done, Balsa threaded a short sword in a scabbard through one of the larger loops on the belt. The belt loop held the sword in place.

"Is it heavy?" Balsa asked. She sat down in a chair and looked up at Chikisa.

He shook his head.

"I don't know the customs of the Tal people, but among my own people, carrying a sword at your hip like that means that you're an adult."

Chikisa's smile radiated joy. His fingers passed reverently over the leather scabbard of the sword. "Thank you, Balsa," he said. "It's..."

Chikisa pulled the sword from its scabbard and watched light dance along the blade.

"In Kanbal, it's customary for the father to say a few words when their child reaches adulthood," Balsa said quietly. "The weight of the blade is the weight of a person's life. This sword could save your life. It could also cause your death. You are entrusting your life to this sword whenever you draw it."

Chikisa's smile collapsed. There was uncertainty in his eyes. "I don't think I'm ready to be an adult yet," he said. "Maybe I should return

this...”

Balsa smiled at him and shook her head. “Prince Ihan offered to let you stay here with him, but you refused. I can tell based on how you’ve been acting that you don’t intend to return to the Tal people. You’re about the right age to start carrying a sword.”

When Chikisa remembered his audience with Prince Ihan, his knees trembled slightly. “I wish he’d let me return the money he gave us...”

“Don’t feel bad about accepting it,” Tanda said. “If you never use it, you can return it someday. But you might need it, and then you’d wish you’d kept it, right?”

Chikisa thought about Prince Ihan’s stern expression as he looked down at the sword Balsa had given him. He dimly remembered Prince Ihan giving the money to him and saying, “Be well.” He must have said more, but Chikisa hadn’t listened. All he remembered clearly now was the outline of Prince Ihan’s back as he’d walked away.

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Spring came early that year. Sada Talhamaya was no more, but the sacred river still flowed from Noyuk into Rota. Its warmth melted the snow and encouraged crops and flowers to grow.

Asra didn’t wake up. She could swallow liquids like water and fruit juice when coaxed, but she couldn’t open her mouth or her eyes on her own. When Tanda opened her eyes to check her pupils, Balsa saw nothing but darkness in them.

“It’s because her soul is gone,” Tanda said. He examined Asra just as Sufar had and agreed with his assessment.

But then, some days later, Tanda examined Asra again. “Hm--I can see why Sufar thought her soul was gone, but it’s...not. It’s just...how do I explain this? It’s really hard to reach. I can’t touch it. It’s like she’s trying to forget herself so that she can disappear.”

Balsa often carried Asra outside and sat with her in fields full of blooming spring flowers. The field nearest their tent was currently lush with cheerful red sarayu blossoms. Some days, Balsa sat with Asra in that field from sunrise to sunset.

One day, Chikisa joined them in the field. He sat down next to Balsa and played with Asra's hair. "She's going to stay like this--isn't she?"

Chikisa looked across the field where sheep were grazing on the fresh spring grass. "It's just like what happened at Shintadan. When she collapsed that time, I was afraid she'd never wake up. I wondered sometimes if it would have been better if she'd stayed asleep rather than remembering all the people she killed."

Chikisa brought his knees to his chest and rested his head on them. "Balsa," he said softly, "This has gone on long enough. You should...you should let me kill her. I don't want her to suffer anymore."

Balsa hugged Asra tighter and leaned back. The spring's first lambs had recently been born; she could see them jumping and playing together on the other side of the field. They seemed so happy to be alive. When they jumped, they used their entire bodies.

"I never would have helped you two if I intended to let either of you die," Balsa said. She ruffled Chikisa's hair. "You should be proud of your sister."

"Proud?" Chikisa sounded confused.

"Asra did something that I thought was impossible: she stood up to Talhamaya. And she won."

Chikisa blinked.

"Asra was always shy and afraid of everything. Talhamaya made her powerful. She could have used that power to kill a lot of people, if she wanted--it would have been easy. But she didn't do that. She sealed Talhamaya inside herself so that the god can't hurt anyone else."

She paused. “I...wouldn’t be able to do that. If I were in Asra’s place, I wouldn’t have been capable of that.” A small smile tugged at her lips.

“If we find out that she’ll definitely die before she comes back to us, I’ll do it, Chikisa. That task shouldn’t be placed on you.” Balsa’s shoulders collapsed inward. “But I don’t think we’re the ones who should decide whether or not Asra lives or dies. That’s her decision.”

“But if her soul is gone, how can she decide?”

“Her soul isn’t gone,” Balsa said. “Tanda told me, and he doesn’t lie. Her soul is still here, it’s just...lost. You probably understand a little of what she’s going through right now. You were unconscious for a long time after you fell, remember?”

Balsa kept smiling and looked down at the lambs. “Asra,” she whispered, “it’s time to wake up. I know you don’t want to. I know you’re in pain, but...” Balsa trailed off.

“It might take a while, deciding whether you really want to live or not,” Balsa said. A soft breeze fluttered through the flowers in the field. “But Asra, look--these are sarayu flowers.”

A pinprick of clear spring light appeared in front of Asra’s eyes in the far distance. She felt the wind on her face.

The light, sweet smell of flowers wafted into Asra’s darkness.

Afterword

In this volume, Asra finally confronted Talhamaya and restored her own soul. The terrorist attacks that happened in the United States in 2001 have been allegorically compared to Talhamaya, but that wasn't my intention. This book was completed and submitted for publication a month before those attacks occurred, so it wasn't written in reaction to those tragic events.

When I wrote the afterword to *Guardian of the God - God's Appearance*, I still didn't know how much the scale of this story would grow. So much time has passed since the start of the series, for me and for the characters. I keep adding more and more of Balsa and Chagum's adventures to this story tree I've created. It's not about to stop growing anytime soon--though I do wonder what it will look like when it's fully grown.

So far, I've written this story without planning very far ahead in terms of plot. I wanted to tell it as organically and naturally as I could, so I've only ever had a basic goal in mind.

I want to offer my sincere thanks to Futaki Makiko, who illustrated *Guardian of the God* during Studio Ghibli's busiest time of the year, and to Kaseisha company for always being so careful and considerate with my work.

Uehashi Nahoko, 2003

Author's Notes for Guardian of the God

Strong Women

I've heard from a lot of readers that Balsa and Shihana have a lot in common, and it's true. They're both superb fighters, don't care very much about traditional gender roles, and are consummate professionals when it comes to their work. The only thing that's really different about them is the way that they think. On that point, you might call them diametrically opposed--or natural enemies. It's certainly difficult to imagine them being friends.

There's another woman who's quite a bit like Balsa and Shihana in *Guardian of the God*: Martha Samada. She's not a warrior, but she's intelligent, perceptive and incredibly brave. She also runs her own very successful business.

I really like women who are like this, which I why I tend to write so many of them. Martha is characterized differently in that she has a genuine interest in things that are coded typically female: clothes and accessories. Aside from the alluring women of Sangal, Martha is the first character I've written with such a strong interest in clothing and fashion. My other strong female characters tend to ignore or neglect clothing entirely.

Just recently I discussed some of these books with some of my coworkers, who asked me about my relatively sparse descriptions of clothes, cosmetics, and hairstyles. The reason they're written the way they are is simple: I'm not terribly interested in them. I've hated going shopping for new clothes since I was a little girl. It wastes so much time! I'd much rather go to a home goods store and stare at the knives, or head for the bookstore and browse.

I have an extremely poor sense of direction. Bookstores are my only reliable landmarks whenever I travel. My mother is completely

different; she absolutely adores clothes. One time she got lost in London and managed to find her way back to her hotel by backtracking to a clothing store she'd spent some time in earlier in the day; that store was only a few blocks away from the hotel.

Women all like different things, obviously. I tend to think that Balsa's interests and my own align pretty closely, but Martha's more like my mother. When I first thought of her, I imagined a short, elegant and vibrantly alive older woman. When I imagine her now, I can see her clothes as well: she favors high, pressed collars and long dresses. I can almost see her smiling at me now. Imagination is an interesting thing, isn't it?

Uehashi Nahoko
May 24, 2007
Abiko

Commentary on Guardian of the Spirit

Hi, I'm Igarashi Satsuki. I imagine that most people reading this book have no idea who I am, so please allow me to introduce myself. I usually draw manga for CLAMP Magazine; occasionally, I write book reviews and recommendations based on what I'm currently reading. Kaseisha company liked my remarks on the Guardian of the Spirit series so much that they asked to publish them. What follows is my commentary on the series, written very much in "fan mode." I love this series more every time I read it, and I'm honored to present my thoughts and ideas on it here.

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The first book in the series that I picked up was *Guardian of the Dream.* The cover caught my eye at a bookstore that specialized in acquiring juvenile fiction. It had only just been published, so it was on the shelf for new releases. I flipped through the first few pages, then

checked the front matter and realized this was the third book in a series. I found the first book, purchased it, and sat down to read at a cafe nearby.

I dashed back to the store before it closed to buy the other two volumes, then went home and kept reading, scarcely aware that I was turning pages. I finished the first book the day I bought it and immediately started reading the second book, *Guardian of the Darkness*. The more I read, the more involved in the story I became. I couldn't put it down.

I had all three books in hardcover, so they were a bit heavy to carry around, but I didn't really mind. I remember being happy to be an adult reading this series; I was able to buy all three at once and could acquire new books as soon as they came out. If I were still a kid, my parents probably would have bought them for me one at a time.

My first impression of the series was that it was a uniquely Asian fantasy work. I've read plenty of fantasy books and manga, but they're usually very heavily influenced by European ideas about creatures, magic, and world-building. The Guardian of the Spirit series stood out to me as being unique in the fantasy genre because of its grounding in a world that looks very much like East Asia.

Children reading the series for the first time might imagine themselves as Chagum or Asra going on adventures with Balsa. Sadly, I'm too old to read the series through that lens, but I also don't consider that a problem. There are many ways to read and interpret this series. I find myself reading it closely, searching for hints and discovering subtle themes. I've seen men in their forties and fifties reading the series on the train with serious and absorbed expressions.

As a character, Balsa feels like she could leap off the page at any moment. She gets involved with all kinds of crises and hazards involving complex politics or magic, but somehow she always makes it through. Whenever her life is in danger, she focuses on what she has to protect; that's what gives her the strength to keep fighting and survive.

But there's a shadow over Balsa's early life that can interfere with her usual motives and behavior. Fighting is exciting for Balsa, but it's

also something she was forced to learn to survive. The complexities of her character are likely clearer to adult readers than child readers, not because children can't understand them, but because many adults have experiences similar to Balsa's. Everyone falls on hard times and has to push through them; the way Balsa does this is unique and inspiring. But I digress.

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It's such a typical fanboy opinion, but my favorite character in the series is definitely Balsa. She had the burdens of an adult placed on her at a young age, but she grew up strong enough to carry them. She's cool in the same way made warriors in stories are cool. I hope that little girls who read this series will want to grow up to be like Balsa.

The whole series treats the events of Balsa's life, but it's not just her story; everything that happens to her is a reflection of the world she lives in. Each new book opens up new characters, new countries and new horizons to explore. I shake my head every time Balsa gets tangled up in another geopolitical or magical mess, but I'm always cheering her on. It's too bad she can't hear me...though admittedly I'm not sure how much it would help if she could.

I also feel a great deal of sympathy for Tanda, and for Chagum to a lesser extent. Tanda really just wants to stay at home and protect the house (and maybe kids?), but with Balsa around, that's not always possible or even necessary. As a dad myself, I understand the desire to stay in place and support a family.

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I want to thank the publisher for giving me the opportunity to express my thoughts. I also want to thank Professor Uehashi for creating this amazing series and sharing it with the world. The readers of this series,

myself included, have a long way to go before the end of the story. I, for one, am looking forward to reading it.

Igarashi Satsuki